Transitional Dropout of Indigenous Pupils: A Case Study in Sungai Siput, Perak

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Abstract
"Transitional dropout" refers to when students complete their studies in primary school but do not continue on to secondary school. However, secondary school studies are necessary to access jobs and improve socioeconomic status. To improve the socioeconomic status of Indigenous communities, it is important to take secondary education seriously as transitional dropouts can cause communities to remain marginalized from current developments. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to explore the transitional dropout of Indigenous students in Sungai Siput, Perak. Using semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling, the researcher interviewed several Indigenous teachers and students who had dropped out in the Sungai Siput district, Perak. The study's results showed that the transitional dropout rate at SMK Bawong was high. This is due to several factors such as sociocultural influences, external influences, weak learning, and peer influence. Data analysis also showed that the lack of involvement from Indigenous parents in education, due to low levels of education, a lack of awareness about the importance of education, and a preference for family-inherited jobs, is an internal factor that further increases the rate of Indigenous student dropout. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of involving various parties, especially Indigenous parents, in tackling transitional dropouts and further improving the quality of education and life for Indigenous communities.
Keywords: Transitional Dropout, Indigenous Pupils, Secondary School

Introduction
Transitional dropout is a phase of falling behind in progress from one transition to another (Chen et al., 2020). This affects students who have completed primary school but have not continued their studies at the secondary school level. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016) places great emphasis on student transition to secondary school as it is the minimum requirement for full socioeconomic participation. In Malaysia, most of the indigenous communities continue to struggle with low socioeconomic status, especially the tribes who choose to live in remote areas such as the Bateq tribe in Kelantan and Pahang, the Mendiq tribe in Kelantan, and the Senoi tribe in the interior of the Perak, Kelantan, and Pahang states. The forest and remote life of the indigenous make them familiar with the forest atmosphere and isolated from urban society (Rahman et al., 2018). A

study by Yusoff et al (2019) on the indigenous Jahai community in Perak state found that economic development in their occupation was still below the poverty level, with an average household income of less than RM500 per month.

Hence, the aim of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MME) is to ensure that there is zero dropout rate for students transitioning from primary to secondary school so that they can acquire knowledge and skills that are suitable for the job market in the 21st century. To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Education has included Initiative #57: Transformation of Indigenous and Indigenous Education, in the Malaysian Education Development Plan (MEDP) 2013-2025. The Ministry of Education is committed to ensuring equity by providing equal access to education for Indigenous and Indigenous students as well as mainstream education, with the involvement and determination of all parties. The school is guided by five concepts of interweaving under Initiative #57, which include networking and interweaving, school leadership, teaching and learning, managing the transition of Indigenous students from year 6 to form 1, as well as managing the attendance program of Indigenous students. Furthermore, the guidebook also proposes an action plan through various programs to increase the involvement of schools with parents and the Indigenous community.

Literature Review
The dropout rate of indigenous students during the transition from primary to secondary school is often attributed to factors such as the location of the school, poverty, and parental attitudes that do not prioritize education (Saidi et al., 2018; Nordin & Abdul Wahab, 2021). Singar and Zainuddin (2017) conducted a study on Orang Asli students in Melaka to explore the factors contributing to their dropout from school. The study revealed that the income level, parents' educational background, and availability of infrastructure and basic facilities were some of the factors that influenced the dropout rate of indigenous students. The authors recommended the development and implementation of an approach to increase government and stakeholder focus on the issue of dropout, particularly by increasing the enrollment of indigenous students in secondary schools, as it is considered one of the best ways to alleviate poverty in the community.

The study is consistent with Dulce Caroline's research in 2019, which found that socioeconomic factors, demographics, school institutions, learning experiences, and students' abilities are among the factors that contribute to high school dropout rates in Mexico. Vasalampi et al (2018) also investigated transitional dropout, focusing on the role of the interpersonal environment in ensuring that students continue their studies at the secondary school level. Another study, conducted on students at a vocational school in Central Finland, suggests that students need motivation to improve their learning abilities and focus. A supportive interpersonal environment, including parents, peers, teachers, and the community, can increase student motivation and encourage efforts to improve academic achievement.

Kattel and Pandey (2020) discovered that transitional dropout among indigenous Tharu students in Nepal is caused by a range of factors, including early marriage, poor economic conditions, peer influence, negative parental attitudes, language difficulties, and low self-esteem. The authors' qualitative study also identified social factors that contribute to dropout, such as inadequate parental and community support, low overall school quality, negative teacher behavior, and limited involvement in decision making. To address these challenges, the proposed research seeks to raise awareness among the indigenous

community in Malaysia about the importance of education for their own and their children's lives.

According to Sawalludin et al (2020), who examined the quality of indigenous education in Malaysia, a key factor in the dropout of indigenous students from secondary school is the community's low awareness of education and limited access to nearby educational institutions. To reduce poverty and improve quality of life, education is crucial. Interviews with students, parents, and community leaders revealed that when skipping school, indigenous students typically engage in activities such as collecting forest produce, hunting, helping their families, fishing, farming, and socializing. The culture of contributing to the family's income also influences the dropout rate of indigenous students transitioning to secondary school, as some perceive existing jobs as sufficient for sustaining their livelihoods. The observation study by Rosly and Mokhtar (2021) found that the main problem faced by indigenous students in literacy learning is the issue of motivation and the attitude of parents in the indigenous community in supporting their children to continue learning. The lack of awareness among the indigenous community who do not prioritize education as a guarantee for the future also makes the interest of indigenous students in learning Malay language low because they prioritize their mother tongue. However, some indigenous communities have begun to realize the importance of education, but support from various parties and continuous efforts are needed to guide them (Abdul Wahab et al., 2016; Mohd Nor et al., 2018). Parents or guardians have shown positive attitudes and perceptions towards their children's education, even though some of them have never attended school. However, there are still some indigenous parents who do not take their children's education seriously (Chin et al., 2021; Abdullah et al., 2023). According to Ahmad et al (2021), the way of life of the indigenous community, which is still shrouded in poverty, has influenced the attitudes and goals of parents towards their children's education, considering that the environment is still their main source of life, through hunting, gathering forest produce, and farming.

Methodology

This case study utilizes a qualitative approach for the data collection process. The data collection was conducted through fieldwork located in Sungai Siput, Perak, and involved Bawong National Secondary School (SMK Bawong) and several Orang Asli primary schools, namely National School (SK) Chenein and SK Kampung Kenang. A total of 11 respondents were interviewed, of which four were administrators, four were teachers who served at the school, and three were Tok Batin. The sample selection was based on purposive sampling using several criteria found in the respondents. Additionally, data was obtained through direct observation in several Orang Asli villages to strengthen the interview data obtained from schools, teachers, and Tok Batin.

The interview questions were in the form of a semi-structured format built based on the objectives of the study, namely:

1.   Exploring the transitional dropout rate that occurs among indigenous students in Sungai Siput, Perak.
2.   Exploring the factors that cause transition dropout among indigenous students in Sungai Siput, Perak

Results and Discussion
Transition Dropout Rate
SMK Bawong is the first indigenous secondary school established in 2016 to address the issue of education dropout among the indigenous community in Sungai Siput, Perak. The school benefits 44 indigenous villages around Sungai Siput, Perak. It aims to facilitate indigenous parents in sending their children to school, and an on-campus hostel is also provided for the comfort of indigenous students. However, the transitional dropout rate shows that many indigenous students still do not continue their education at the secondary school level. Table 1 shows the enrollment statistics of Form 1 students at SMK Bawong for the years 2019 to 2022.

Table 1
1st Form Student Registration Statistics

Year	Sum of standard 6 pupils	Sum of registered form 1 student	Enrollment Percentage
2019	171	103	60.2%
2020	190	109	57.4%
2021	230	128	55.7%
2022	194	123	63.4%

Source: Student Affairs, SMK Bawong (2022)

Table 1 shows that a transitional dropout occurs every year, with 30% to 40% of the expected number of students not registering. This dropout rate increases as the number of students who register decreases from Form 1 to Form 5, as indigenous students choose to leave school. Table 2 presents the number of indigenous students who are absent from school for more than 60 days by level for the year 2023. The dropout rate ultimately leads to students dropping out of school for various reasons. As a result, only 30% to 40% of the total number of students who register successfully sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE).

Table 2
Statistics of Indigenous Students Absent for More than 60 Days for the Year 2023

Form	Sum of Students Absent for More than 60 Days
1	18
2	46
3	34
4	22
5	22
Sum	142 Pupils

Source: Student Affairs, SMK Bawong (2023)

Sociocultural Factors
Three respondents identified sociocultural factors such as lifestyle practices, environment, thoughts, and background of indigenous life as the main causes of transition dropout. The indigenous community in Sungai Siput, Perak is highly dependent on their environment for their livelihood, including palm oil, rubber, orchards, and forests. As a result, indigenous children have grown up participating in routine activities with their parents and are more

interested in being in their environment than in attending school. While many indigenous parents recognize the importance of education, they lack the power to compel their children to attend school because their customs prioritize individual freedom and choice. Children are also permitted to engage in forest activities and are trusted to take care of themselves. Furthermore, the surrounding community views indigenous children who do not attend school as normal compared to the larger community. As a result, there is no pressure or admonishment from the community to encourage indigenous children to attend school.

> *"For me, it is a sociocultural factor. We used to be too lazy to go to school, but our parents would force us. Likewise, with the surrounding community, they would ask why we didn't go to school. However, in indigenous culture, there is no pressure from parents and the community to attend school. Perhaps this is because their way of life is very relaxed, and they are accustomed to living without having to worry about the future. They always receive help, so their thinking is also that it doesn't matter if their child goes to school or not."*
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> *"These indigenous children are influenced by their environment, which is the forest and the garden. Parents and the Indigenous community are more concerned about their daily needs for survival. Furthermore, the parents' low educational background makes it difficult for them to guide their children's learning. Therefore, there is little parental intervention in education unless the child is motivated to learn."*
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> *"Parents do not put in a lot of effort to emphasize the importance of education to their children. They may say things like, 'He doesn't want a teacher, what can we do?' This is the reason given by the parents. It can be difficult to persuade the child otherwise."*

This statement clearly illustrates how sociocultural factors, such as daily practices, environment, thoughts, behavior, and the background of the Indigenous community's life, have influenced their attitudes and actions towards education. Their way of life makes it difficult for them to force and reprimand children to attend school unless the child consents to it. This finding is consistent with the studies by Knauer et al (2017); Muir & Bohr (2019), which show that the indigenous community highly values children as individuals with the right to make decisions, explore their environment as they please, and protect their children.

External Influence Factors
Since the outbreak of COVID-19, indigenous students have been exposed to the use of mobile phones, and some village areas now have internet access to facilitate online learning. According to Tok Batin, almost all indigenous children now own a mobile phone. However, problems arise when they become too engrossed in social media or online games without parental supervision. Improper use of mobile phones has caused many indigenous children to become addicted and lose interest in attending school. Moreover, it is difficult to curb the influence of alcohol, cigarettes, and ketum water as sellers continue to sell these items to minors, and they are easily accessible in grocery stores.

> *"With the advancement of technology, almost all indigenous children now have access to mobile phones, and even 3-4 year olds are able to use them. Similarly, parents are also interested in using mobile phones."*

> *"There is a grocery store located in front of the school that sells alcohol and cigarettes. As teachers, we have no authority to intervene in activities that occur outside of the school. There are many external influences that affect the students, such as the use of kratom. It is unclear where these substances are being obtained from."*

The use of mobile phones and the influence of social media and online games cannot be controlled by the school as it falls under the purview of parents. However, these factors have become a reason for some indigenous children to lose interest in attending school. Similarly, the influence of alcohol, cigarettes, and kratom water has also contributed to a lack of interest in continuing education among indigenous children.

Academic Achievement Factors
The low level of academic achievement at the primary school level has also reduced the confidence and interest of indigenous students in continuing their education. According to the respondents, some indigenous students still struggle to master the 3M skills, which makes them feel that the subjects they are learning are difficult, despite the teachers adapting their teaching to suit the students' abilities.

> *"We cannot solely blame the primary school for this issue since we know that students who struggle to master the 3M skills are often those who have a history of absenteeism in primary school, resulting in them falling behind. If these students lack interest in learning at the primary school level, it becomes extremely challenging for them to pursue further education in high school, unless their parents actively encourage or force them to do so."*
> *"If they cannot read and write fluently, they may lack confidence and interest in learning, and as a result, they may feel that continuing their education at the secondary level is not important. In some cases, they may not even understand the relevance of what they are learning."*

The language barrier faced by indigenous students in primary school is also a factor that affects their mastery of 3M skills. Therefore, efforts to improve the mastery of Malay subjects need to be taken by the school, such as providing additional classes for Malay language or involving parents and the community in learning activities. This is in line with the recommendation by Abdul Wahab et al (2017) that schools need to establish closer relationships with parents and the community to provide support and guidance for Orang Asli students in their learning process.

Peer Influence Factors
Being in the same racial group influences indigenous students greatly by their peers. Various activities are carried out together until they come to an agreement not to attend school. The activities that are typically done in their environment are considered more interesting than the learning process at school. The enjoyment of being in a group of friends who do not attend school causes a decrease in their interest in learning

> *"Sometimes, they do not attend school because their friends are not attending either. They go with their friends. As teachers, we always visit their village and see them having fun in groups, climbing trees, and playing in the forest."*

> "*They enjoy various activities there, and it is challenging to force them to attend school. Even their parents cannot do much but only smile*."
> "*Students usually skip school because they follow their friends, and this often leads to dropping out of school. Some students do not even reach level 5 or take MCE*."

The influence of peers who do not attend school can also affect indigenous students who are studying, leading to a reduction in the number of students who sit for MCE. A study conducted by Awang et al (2020) on the Semelai indigenous community in Negeri Sembilan identified four causes of truancy: students' attitudes, peer influence, social-ecological attraction, and parents' lenient attitude.

Involvement of The School and Tok Batin
The school and Tok Batin of each village will convene a meeting to discuss various issues related to indigenous student dropouts, including school truancy and disciplinary problems. The school has initiated several programs, such as the CAKNA program and the "Let's Go to School" campaign. Every month, school administrators and teachers will take turns visiting the indigenous village to engage with parents, provide information, and persuade Indigenous children to attend school. Tok Batin also participates in school activities and offers advice to parents and the indigenous community.

> "*We have a CAKNA program, and every month, teachers visit homes to persuade children to attend school. However, at times, when we visit, children run into the forest, and despite offering to pick them up on certain days, they still don't show up. Unfortunately, parents do not seem to care, and they even suggest that we can take their child if we want to. There is no support from parents*."
> "*Even when we try to talk to them, they do not listen. We offer advice and suggestions, but they do the same to us. I also give advice to parents, but they ask me to give advice to their children instead. It's difficult to understand the parents' mindset here; they seem to leave everything to us*."

Observations suggest that the relationship between the school and Tok Batin is very close, and they plan and implement various programs together. However, indigenous parents' involvement, especially in dealing with transitional dropouts, is minimal due to their comfortable attitude towards life. According to Ribeiro et al (2021), involving indigenous parents is a key initiative in the teaching process for indigenous students. Erdener and Knoeppel (2019) studied parents' perceptions of their involvement in primary schools in rural Turkey, based on Epstein's (2001) six types of involvement. They also examined differences in parental involvement based on demographic characteristics such as education level, income, marital status, and age. The results of their quantitative study showed that income is the most significant factor, followed by education level and age.

Conclusion
In conclusion, the high rate of transition dropouts among indigenous students in SMK Bawong requires serious attention and intervention from various parties, including schools, parents, and the indigenous community. The lack of support from parents and the sociocultural challenges faced by teachers in understanding the indigenous community are some of the

major obstacles that need to be addressed. Furthermore, external negative influences on the students are beyond the school's control, and the indigenous community must also be involved in addressing these issues. To overcome these challenges, it is necessary to implement collaborative efforts among schools, parents, and the indigenous community in achieving the goals and direction of indigenous education. These efforts can lead to the reduction of dropout rates among indigenous students and ultimately benefit the entire indigenous community.

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