

PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS
TOWARDS MOTHER TONGUE-BASED EDUCATION:
A CASE STUDY OF BIDAYUH IN MALAYSIA
การรับรู้ของพ่อแม่และครูที่มีต่อการศึกษารัฐภาษาแม่
: กรณีศึกษา BIDAYUH ในประเทศมาเลเซีย

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Abstract

Indigenous languages are oral languages and most have not undergone language standardisation. The vitality of many indigenous languages is threatened because of the shrinking number of speakers and the lack of literacy. The study examined the perceptions of parents and teachers towards mother tongue-based education in Bidayuh playschools and kindergartens. The data were collected from nine teachers and twenty-four parents from the villages of Benuk, Sinjok, Apar and Pasir Hilir located in the Kuching hinterland. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews showed that the parents and teachers have similar views on the benefits of Bidayuh heritage language

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playschools and kindergartens. The parents reported their children's personal development, academic benefits, ability to help in their children's schoolwork, and the maintenance of Bidayuh language and culture. From the teachers' perspective, the Bidayuh playschools and kindergartens prepared the children for primary school, reinforced Bidayuh language and culture for the next generation, and helped in the children's personal and spiritual development. However, the teachers also brought up the challenges of community misconceptions of the purpose of mother-tongue based education, financial problem, and writing material problems. The study shows the precarious sustainability of mother tongue-based education programmes initiated by the community.

Keywords: indigenous languages, mother tongue-based education, Bidayuh language, Malaysian, playschools and kindergartens

บทคัดย่อ

ภาษาถิ่นเป็นภาษาพูดและภาษาถิ่นส่วนใหญ่ไม่เป็นภาษาทางการ ความมีชีวิตชีวาของภาษาถิ่นหลายภาษาถูกคุกคามเนื่องจากจำนวนผู้พูดที่ลดลงและการขาดความรู้ นักวิจัยได้ศึกษาการรับรู้ของผู้ปกครองและครูต่อการศึกษาโดยใช้ภาษาแม่ในโรงเรียนเตรียมอนุบาลและโรงเรียนอนุบาล ที่จัดการเรียนการสอนด้วยภาษา Bidayuh ข้อมูลงานวิจัยถูกรวบรวมจากครู 9 คนและผู้ปกครอง 24 คนจากหมู่บ้าน Benuk, Sinjok, Apar และ Pasir Hilir ซึ่งตั้งอยู่ในชนบททางไกลของ Kuching การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างแสดงให้เห็นว่าผู้ปกครองและครูมีความคิดเห็นที่คล้ายคลึงกันเกี่ยวกับประโยชน์ของโรงเรียนเตรียมอนุบาล และโรงเรียนอนุบาลที่ใช้ภาษา Bidayuh ผู้ปกครองรายงานว่าบุตรหลานมีพัฒนาการส่วนบุคคล ได้รับผลประโยชน์ด้านวิชาการ มีความสามารถในการช่วยในการเรียนของบุตรหลานและได้อนุรักษ์ภาษา Bidayuh และวัฒนธรรม Bidayuh จากมุมมองของครูเห็นว่าโรงเรียนเตรียมอนุบาลและอนุบาลที่ใช้ภาษา Bidayuh

ได้เตรียมพร้อมเด็กนักเรียนสำหรับโรงเรียนชั้นประถมศึกษา ส่งเสริมการเรียนรู้ภาษา Bidayuh และวัฒนธรรม Bidayuh สำหรับคนรุ่นต่อไปและช่วยให้เด็กนักเรียนมีการพัฒนาตนเองและจิตวิญญาณ อย่างไรก็ตามครูยังได้ให้ข้อคิดเห็นไว้ว่ายังมีผู้ปกครองที่ไม่เข้าใจวัตถุประสงค์การจัดการเรียนการสอนโดยใช้ภาษาแม่ ปัญหาด้านการเงินโรงเรียนเตรียมอนุบาลและอนุบาลที่ใช้ภาษา Bidayuh และปัญหาในการเขียนเอกสารประกอบการสอน การศึกษานี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงความยั่งยืนที่ไม่แน่นอนของโปรแกรมการศึกษาที่ใช้ภาษาแม่ ซึ่งริเริ่มโดยชุมชน

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาพื้นเมือง, การศึกษาภาษาแม่, ภาษา Bidayuh, ชาวมาเลเชีย, เตรียมอนุบาล และอนุบาล

1. Introduction

In mother tongue-based education, the students' own language is used as the medium of instruction (UNESCO, 2003). This approach of teaching in the mother tongue aligns with the themes of social interaction and culture which Vygotsky (1978) posits in his theoretical framework of cognitive development. Mother tongue-based education enables students to engage prior knowledge, and the teacher to scaffold the content more easily. For instance, hearing examples in the mother tongue would help a child to grasp the concept of phonemic awareness, a key skill in learning to read. That child would also be able to transfer that understanding when learning another language. When students' first language is used as a foundational educational resource, that language can serve as a stepping stone to support a more accomplished learning of subsequent languages (Cummins, 2007).

Research increasingly confirms the use of the mother tongue as an important factor in the academic success of minority students in the United States, the Philippines, Guatemala, and also in Malaysia (Bagang, 2017;

Dumatog & Dekker, 2003; Moinian et al., 2016 Thomas & Collier, 1997; Walter, 2010). In the United States, for example, Thomas and Collier (1997) found a direct correlation between overall academic success of non-native English speakers (in all subjects, including English) and the amount of grade level academic work done in the student's first language. The gains in English and academic subjects were greater when the students were in a bilingual immersion programme, where the mother tongue (often Spanish) was used extensively in addition to English. However, they reported that earlier exposure to English alone, without mother tongue support, did not lead to greater gains in English proficiency. Thomas and Collier's (1997) findings have been duplicated in different contexts around the globe. In the Philippines, for instance, Dumatog and Dekker (2003) found that minority language students learned more effectively when taught in their mother tongue when compared to students taught in the standard languages of instruction, Filipino and English. Walter's (2010) research from Guatemala, Eritrea, and Cameroon showed that the mother tongue is a more effective medium of instruction for teaching ethnic minority students than national and international languages. Research in Malaysia has also shown the effectiveness of mother tongue-based education programmes. For instance, mother tongue-based kindergarten in Kadazandusun language in Sabah is effective (Moinian et al., 2016). Bagang (2017) reported that pupils from a kindergarten in Tenghilan were more confident and performed better academically in primary schools than their counterparts from other kindergartens. Other than Kadazandusun in Sabah, the only other indigenous languages which have been included in the Malaysian primary and secondary education system are Iban in Sarawak, and Semai in West Malaysia. These languages are taught for 120 minutes per week, as part of the "Ethnic Language" programme (Ghani, 2014).

In Malaysia, indigenous languages may only be used as the medium of instruction at the preschool level.

The research on mother tongue education seems especially relevant when considering the status of minority language students in Malaysia. The Malaysia Educational Blueprint 2013-2025 issued by the Ministry of Education reveals a historical and ongoing performance gap between rural, indigenous students and their urban, non-indigenous peers. Indigenous students attend lower-performing schools, drop out more often, and score lower on standardised tests than non-indigenous students (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2013). For example, over 60% of indigenous students in Peninsular Malaysia did not meet the minimum requirements on the UPSR, the standardised test at the end of primary school (Md Nor et. al., 2011). Songan (2004) stated that Bidayuh students' achievement tends to lag behind other ethnic groups as well.

In the present study on Bidayuh language playschools and kindergartens, we refer, in part, to the instrumentalist versus traditionalist views of language use in education. As Albury (2019) notes, Malaysia, like many other countries, wrestles with the tension between the two poles in the instrumentalist and traditionalist dichotomy. In short, the instrumentalist view of education emphasises its utilitarian and economic value, and favours languages that promote such value. The traditionalist view, on the other hand, values traditional culture, identity, and unity. In this dichotomy, mother tongue-based education would align with a traditionalist view.

Little is known about whether indigenous parents would choose mother tongue-based education and preservation of heritage over the utilitarian and economic value associated with preschool education in standard languages. Therefore, studies are needed to investigate parental

views on mother tongue-based preschool education. In Malaysia, studies on Bidayuh preschools are needed because Bidayuh is not yet taught in primary school (unlike Iban, Kadazandusun and Semai), and the findings will provide empirical evidence on the feasibility of advocating literacy in Bidayuh in the national curriculum.

This paper reports a case study on the perceptions of parents and teachers towards Bidayuh mother tongue playschool and kindergarten programme in Sarawak, a Malaysian state located on Borneo Kalimantan.

2. Background on Bidayuh mother tongue-based education in playschools and kindergartens

In Sarawak, the Bidayuh community numbers 217,800 and is the second largest indigenous group after the Iban (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2017). Over 90% of the Bidayuh live in the Kuching and Serian districts (circled in Figure 1). Traditionally the Bidayuh were subsistence farmers growing rice, pepper, and durian, but now many Bidayuh live in Kuching, and hold professional and technical jobs. Many urban Bidayuh, especially those who have completed university education, have not actively passed on their own mother tongue to the next generation (Norahim 2010) because they intermarry with other ethnic groups or Bidayuh from other isolects and turn to speaking Iban, English or Malay as the language for family communication.

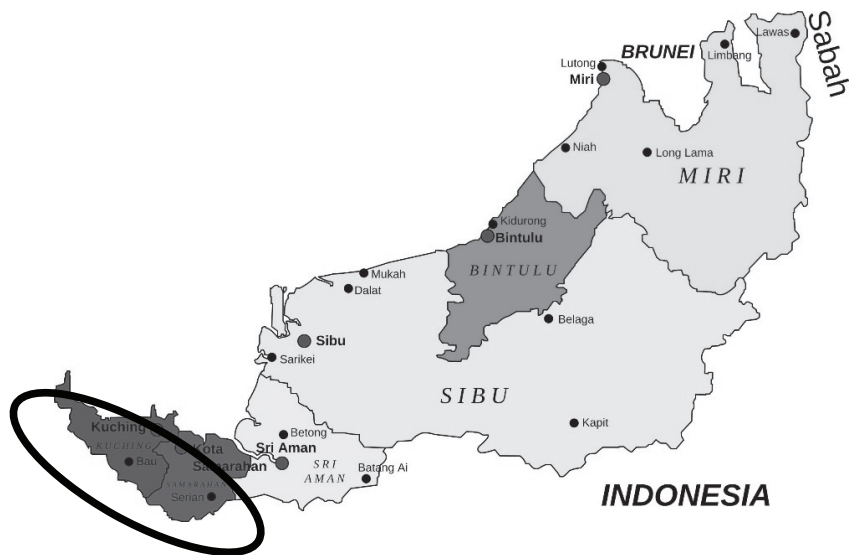


Figure 1. Map of Sarawak showing the Bidayuh area

(Source: <https://www.iconspng.com/image/41404/map-of-sarawak-malaysia>)

The Bidayuh language family comprises five isolects, namely, Salako and Rara (Lundu District), Bau (formerly called Jagoi or Bau-Jagoi, spoken in Bau District), Biatah (Kuching division, for example, Siburan and Penrissen) and Serian (formerly called Bukar-Sadung, spoken in Serian District). Lexicostatistical analysis shows that the overlap between the isolects is not sufficient for one standard Bidayuh to be developed (Joyik et al., 2010), which is partly why a unified orthography has proven elusive. During the colonial rule, missionaries produced mostly religious texts; later language development included educational materials and traditional stories (Noeb & Ridu, 2017).

Today, Bidayuh remains an almost exclusively spoken language and has strong vitality in Bidayuh-dominant rural areas. Coluzzi et al. (2013) rated Bidayuh vitality at level 6a on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational

Disruption Scale (EGIDS) framework. A language vitality rating of 6a means that the community has “sustainable orality”, that is, the language community is consistently using the language and actively transmitting it to the next generation (Lewis & Simons, 2009). In a Sustainable Use Model (SUM) workshop held in Kuching, speakers from the Bau and Biatah isolects rated their vitality at EGIDS level 6a (Hanawalt, 2015). However, the EGIDS vitality level of 6a is applicable in the Bidayuh villages and not in urban centres. Ting and Campbell (2007) found that Bidayuh married to Iban spouses often do not speak Bidayuh with their children but ended up speaking Iban, Malay or English with family members from other ethnic groups due to a need for a shared language of communication.

The fear of language loss in the Bidayuh community led the Dayak Bidayuh National Association (DBNA) to establish the Bidayuh Language Development and Preservation Project (BLDPP) in 2000 to promote Bidayuh (Bongarrá & Siam, 2017). The BLDPP convened Bidayuh elders, linguists, and community leaders, along with outside language specialists to document the Bidayuh varieties and to produce literature. Each of the five main isolects of Bidayuh settled upon its own spelling system and the BLDPP produced picture dictionaries, word lists, and other materials for mother tongue schools.

The Bidayuh preschool project started in June 2006, when DBNA submitted a proposal to UNESCO in Bangkok, Thailand, requesting help to establish mother tongue-based playschools and kindergartens (Joyik et al., 2017). DBNA believed that having Bidayuh medium schools aligned well with its goals: furthering Bidayuh language and culture as well as aiding Bidayuh education (DBNA, 2020). DBNA President Ik Pahon Joyik (2008) stressed that the Bidayuh medium preschools aimed to provide Bidayuh students with a strong educational foundation. The schools were also meant to encourage intergenerational transmission of the language and culture and to

strengthen ethnic identity (Siam & Smith, 2013). UNESCO agreed to the proposal, and DBNA, with technical help from SIL Malaysia, used Bidayuh writers to develop sets of stories to be used in the DBNA Bidayuh mother tongue playschools. In January 2007, five playschools began in the five main Bidayuh language communities using an almost exclusively play-based oral curriculum in the mother tongue. In 2009, five of the village schools added kindergartens to their existing playschools. At its height, the programme had 14 schools in nine villages. In recent years, the number of schools has declined due to lack of students, finance and trained teachers.

The teaching materials were largely grounded in the Bidayuh culture and tapped into the local, concrete experiences of the children. DBNA and SIL Malaysia developed the mathematics, reading (both phonics and whole language), writing, science, and ethnoarts curricula. The teachers were members of the villages. The classroom environment was adorned with traditional Bidayuh tools and crafts.

3. Method of the Study

The study focused on kindergartens that used the Bidayuh isolects as the medium of instruction. The four sites selected for the research were Benuk, Sinjok, Apar and Pasir Hilir in Lundu in the hinterlands of Kuching (at least 45 minutes by car). We did not include the villages that only had playschools, with three- and four-year old children, as they were less relevant to our focus on academic performance in primary school. Most of the children in the kindergarten classes were five years old.

For this study, nine teachers and 24 parents were interviewed. The parents were those whose children had matriculated through the Bidayuh kindergartens (most had attended the playschools as well).

The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide. Parents and teachers were asked for their opinions on the mother tongue-based schools and the impact the programme had on their children's performance in primary school. Upon obtaining consent, the researchers conducted the interviews in a natural setting: teachers in the school building, and parents in their homes. DBNA assisted in the data collection by writing to the teachers and parents in the villages to inform them of the study and to request their participation. The playschool and kindergarten facilitators made arrangements for interviews with teachers and parents.

Most of the interviews lasted 15 to 20 minutes with some lasting up to 45 minutes. In Benuk and Sinjok, we interviewed the parents in Bidayuh, but the teachers in Malay. Malay was used for both the parent and teacher interviews in Apar and Pasir Hilir. The interview data were analysed thematically to identify benefits and challenges of Bidayuh heritage playschools and kindergartens.

4. Results

In this section, the Bidayuh word *piramin* is used to refer to the Bidayuh playschools and kindergartens, as this is the word used by parents and teachers in the interviews. Their names are abbreviated to maintain anonymity.

4.1 Perspective of parents of children who attended Bidayuh playschools and kindergartens

The interview results showed that the parents who chose *piramin* over government-operated kindergartens believed in the value of Bidayuh mother tongue-based education, to the extent that they were willing to pay higher fees or travel further to take their children to school. Children at government-run kindergartens are even provided with uniforms and daily

food. All of the villages except for Pasir Hilir, have a government-run (Kemajuan Masyarakat, KEMAS) kindergarten established by the Office of Community Advancement in the Malaysian Ministry of Rural Development. KEMAS uses the standard Malaysian pre-school curriculum with Malay and English as the medium of instruction.

To the parents, the four main benefits of mother tongue-based education in *piramin* were: (1) personal development; (2) academic benefits; (3) parents' involvement in children's schoolwork; and (4) maintenance of Bidayuh language and culture.

First, the parents believed that the *piramin* fostered their children's personal development as shown by the interview excerpts.

- My child is independent and confident. He socialises and makes friends. (K, Benuk)
- My child mixes easily, and is not shy. He is disabled and KEMAS did not accept him but the *piramin* accepted him. (Z, Sinjok).

Second, the parents noted that the *piramin* benefitted their children academically, enabling them to learn the basics such as the alphabet, writing, mathematics, and the Malay language. One mother (A, Apar) attributed the success of learning the basics to instruction in the mother tongue.

- My grandchild learns ABC and writing. (K, Benuk)
- My child can understand what is taught. E.g. Maths. She can read and write well and understand the Malay language. (Z, Sinjok)
- It is easy to learn and study because lessons are in Bidayuh. It is easy to understand. They succeeded in learning the basics. They were able to learn because it's their own language. (A, Apar)

N from Pasir Hilir remarked that in two weeks his three-year old son learnt to hold a pencil, draw, count one to 10, and say the letters A to Z. He said that he would stand at the open window to observe what was happening in the class. He felt that his son could start school at such an early age because the playschool used the same language as the one used at home. He felt that his son would be prepared for primary school.

The use of Bidayuh as the medium of instruction seemed to have enabled the children to acquire literacy, that is, the basics, everyday reading processes such as word recognition, phonics, and lexical decoding (McNamara et al., 2019). R from Pasir Hilir explained that when her daughter went to another preschool after attending the *piramin*, that she was the “champion”, ranked number one out of over 100 students. R. claimed that the mother tongue instruction gave her daughter a head start in formal education.

The use of the mother tongue enabled the parents to help their children in their schoolwork. K from Benuk said that even she could help her granddaughter with her homework because it was in Bidayuh. Parents contrasted the ease of helping their children with Bidayuh with the difficulty of helping their primary school children with their Iban language schoolwork.

Finally, the parents valued the role of the Bidayuh playschools and kindergartens in the maintenance of Bidayuh language and culture. R from Pasir Hilir chose to send her child to the Bidayuh Rara preschool because she wanted her daughter to have solid ability in her mother tongue. She did not want her children to be like others who came back to the village speaking “mixed” languages after they left the village to further their studies. The *piramin*’s role in Bidayuh language and cultural maintenance is characteristic of mother tongue-based education programmes, and it can help sustain language vitality. The most important factor in language vitality is intergenerational transmission in the family (Fishman, 1991). The Bidayuh

playschools and kindergartens have spurred increased use of Bidayuh in multilingual homes. The “newly awakened pride” is exemplified by one father who, being married to a non-Bidayuh (Ch, an Iban from Apar) did not speak Bidayuh at home previously but began to speak the language more after his children went to the *piramin* and spoke Bidayuh freely at home.

To sum up, the parents interviewed were supportive of the Bidayuh *piramin*. The parents felt that the children learned well in the Bidayuh schools and that they prepared them well for the subsequent school years.

4.2 Teachers’ perspective of Bidayuh mother tongue-based education

The interviews with the teachers identified four main benefits of Bidayuh playschools and kindergartens. The teachers reported that: (1) the children were prepared for primary school; (2) the programme reinforced Bidayuh language and culture; (3) the children showed positive personal development; and (4) the programme encouraged children’s spiritual development.

First, the teachers believed that the *piramin* prepared the children well for primary school. For example, according to E (the teacher at Apar), the children were able to easily to grasp concepts in Bidayuh and were able to transfer understanding into Malay. A *piramin* teacher said that that primary school teachers in her village told her that it was easier to teach the former *piramin* students than it was from the government KEMAS schools. Primary school teachers at SK Apar told C, one of the teachers at the Apar *piramin*, that the language skills of the former *piramin* students, especially in reading, far surpassed those of other students. M, the teacher in Pasir Hilir, reported that the principal of the local primary school, SK Holy Name, told her that student performance improved for three years running when the *piramin* students attended, better than previous years when they did not attend.

The teachers, like the parents, also reported that the *piramin* reinforced Bidayuh language and culture. Al, a teacher from Sinjok, recalled some mothers telling her that their children could speak better Bidayuh than them. A, the kindergarten teacher from Benuk, said that the *piramin* passes on the Bidayuh language, customs, traditions and culture. For example, the children learn to identify leaves used in Bidayuh food and learn to pound them in the traditional way in class.

The children's personal development was the third benefit of mother tongue-based education from the teachers' perspective. They described how the *piramin* helped the children:

- to be independent: they can go to the toilet and eat by themselves. (A, Benuk)
- to wear trousers and eat by themselves. (D, Benuk)
- to be more disciplined than the other children once they move on to preschool and primary school (six years of age). (C, Apar)

M, a teacher from Pasir Hilir, also heard good reports of her students' positive personal development from their primary school principal. He told her that the children who had attended the *piramin* were better prepared and more mature than their peers.

Finally, the impact of the *piramin* on the children's spiritual development was brought up by a few teachers. One of the teachers from Benuk, A, explained how the *piramin* built up the Christian character of the children:

The Moral Education here is a Christian syllabus and it is very good. At the beginning, the children are afraid of ghosts but they learn that God is with them. The children pray before taking their meals. Every morning they memorise Bible verses according to a program, which is two Bible verses every five weeks.

Moral education is a compulsory subject in Malaysian education, from preschool to secondary school. Muslim students follow an Islamic curriculum. Non-Muslims have moral education. In the case of the Bidayuh *piramin*, the moral curriculum presented Christian teaching to the Christian children.

Despite the teachers' reports of the benefits of the Bidayuh playschools and kindergartens, they encountered challenges in several aspects. (1) community misconceptions; (2) financial struggles; and (3) written materials, particularly issues of spelling.

The teachers reported that some parents in the community have misunderstood the purpose of the schools. Instead of seeing the Bidayuh schools as a bridge to help their children succeed in further education, some parents thought that learning Bidayuh was the goal of the programme. T from Sinjok said that some parents had asked her "what's the point of learning Bidayuh?" They said that English and Malay are more important and that their children already speak Bidayuh. This underlying belief that using the mother tongue has no instrumental value has hampered the growth of the programme.

As for financial challenges, the operational costs to maintain the *piramin* are borne by the villages themselves. In Benuk, for example, the village has yearly fund raising banquets to benefit the *piramin* and the village headman is very supportive. Some village *piramin* committees are more engaged than others and, so while some schools do well, others struggle to pay their teachers.

Finally, the teachers encountered challenges because of the linguistic diversity of the Bidayuh isolects and criticism from language purists. For example, the two Biatah villages speak different dialects: Sinjok uses the reference dialect, Siburan, while Benuk has its own isolect, BiBenuk (Kroeger,

2009). As a result, the same letters represent different sounds in Benuk and Sinjok, creating confusion and making phonics harder to teach. In addition to the dialectical challenges, the teachers reported that sometimes people in the village criticise their language usage. Al from Sinjok is a Biatah and she teaches Biatah to the children, but said, “Some of the old people in this village do not agree with some of the new words; there was an old man who was a previous headmaster. He used to stand outside the school and ask me what I taught.” The old man’s criticism is that of a hyper-traditionalist, who wants the “pure” traditional variety of the language to be taught.

Despite the challenges and occasional criticism, the teachers at the Bidayuh playschools and kindergartens enjoyed teaching in the *piramin*, and they appreciated the training and the opportunity to be a part of the mother tongue-based education to help the children to have a head start in education and to strengthen their identity as Bidayuh.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study showed that both parents and teachers reported the remarkable academic, personal and spiritual development of children who attended the Bidayuh *piramin*. The early exposure to literacy and numeracy in their mother tongue lowered the language barriers for the children allowing them to easily access prior knowledge and learn new concepts. Our findings corroborate Benson’s work (2004) who found that the use of a familiar language to teach beginning literacy facilitates an understanding of sound-symbol or meaning-symbol correspondence. In addition, the children socialised well with their peers and their teachers. These observations validate Benson (2004) who reports that self-esteem and identity are strengthened by the use of the first language, thereby increasing motivation and initiative, as well as creativity.

Another significant outcome of the *piramin* is the opportunity for parental participation in the children's preschool education. Parents, and even grandparents, are able to communicate with the teachers to discuss their children's progress. The *piramin*, because they are community based and focused on the local language and culture, are welcoming to parents. Some of the parents told us that they would attend the *piramin* with their children. This "open door policy" gives them a sense of usefulness and indirectly motivates them to be involved in the children's education. Research in mother tongue-based education suggests that parental participation is one of the most important factors for the success of the programme (Benson, 2004).

Both parents and teachers agreed that using the mother tongue in the *piramin* helped to transmit the Bidayuh language and culture to the children. Some parents reported that their children knew and used more Bidayuh words than they did because they were exposed to many artifacts of Bidayuh culture such as handicrafts, traditional costumes and dance. This focus on ethnoarts and culture is another positive aspect of mother tongue-based education highlighted in the literature by Benson (2004, pp. 12-13) as "volarization of the home language and culture".

While the study found that the parents' perception of mother tongue-based education was positive, the teachers reported that other parents in the community viewed the *piramin* as a backward choice of school. We surmise that this negative view of the mother tongue-based education is one of the reasons that a number of the *piramin* have closed due to lack of support. DBNA and its partners have tried to correct the common misperception that the schools are simply going to teach the mother tongue to the children and enrolling their children in the *piramin* is a retrograde step. DBNA's message has been that it is not the language itself that is being

taught, but skills and knowledge are being taught through the mother tongue. Some villages seem to have understood this message, but most have not and view the *piramin* as merely working toward a traditionalist end. Viewed in this light, it would appear that the programme's lack of an English component was a crucial oversight. Having English taught, even orally, may have convinced more parents, and perhaps even the village and community leaders, of the instrumental value of the schools. Bidayuh parents seem to be convinced that "earlier is better" when it comes to learning Malay and English.

This study revealed another problem confronting the Bidayuh mother tongue-based education common to indigenous languages with a diversity of isolects: dialect variations make it difficult for a standardised writing system and educational resources to be developed. A lack of educational resources is a threat to the sustainability of the programme and is a common problem in mother tongue-based education, particularly in the case of indigenous languages with oral tradition, dialect variations, and under-developed orthography (Ball, 2011; Trudell & Young, 2016). In the present study, the teachers and curriculum developers had to contend with the unintelligibility between various isolects within the Bidayuh speech system and the linguistic diversity of the Bidayuh speech system. Each of the Bidayuh isolects has numerous subdialects. For instance, in the Biatah isolect, there were *piramin* in different subdialects, making both the development of materials and the teaching of phonics more difficult. One could argue that these two villages, even though separated by only 25 kilometres, have different mother tongues. This diversity of isolects and subdialects has hampered community leaders wanting to linguistically unify the Bidayuh people.

A qualitative study can provide insight that a quantitative study cannot. Issues can be examined more deeply and from different vantage points. One limitation of the study is that the parents who consented to be interviewed self-selected to join the research, while other voices, potentially of parents more critical of the *piramin*, were not heard. Further research should examine the effect, if any, attending the Bidayuh schools has on academic results in primary school.

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