

## Comparative Analysis of Language and Education Policies for Indigenous Minorities in Australia and Malaysia

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the implication of language and education policies for the indigenous minority populations in two contrasting multicultural and multilingual post-colonial nations, Australia and Malaysia. By comparing and contrasting ethnolinguistic and educational policies in these two diverse nations, this paper explores how indigenous minorities have been positioned within each nation's quest for meeting the challenges of becoming multilingual and multicultural nations. The authors argue that although both countries promote multicultural ideals, they fall short in their acknowledgement of the dignity of difference for their indigenous communities. The authors assert that educational and language policies for indigenous peoples must acknowledge the importance of difference and therefore include indigenous cultural ways of knowing, being, and doing to achieve successful educational outcomes.

**KEYWORDS:** Indigenous Australian, Orang Asli, Malaysia, indigenous education, indigenous language policy

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All over the world linguistic diversity is threatened, evidenced by the fact that small languages are rapidly disappearing (Evans, 2010). Efforts to stem the loss of endangered languages have included policy initiatives in education and activism around minority language rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, Brutt-Griffler, Canagarajah, Pennycook, & Tollefson, 2004). In 1953, UNESCO published *The*

*Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* and found it “axiomatic” that the best medium for teaching is the mother tongue. Since that time, the notion of “language rights” has become well established in the disciplines of sociolinguistics, the sociology of language, and language policy and planning (May, 2005, p. 319). Nevertheless, critics of minority language rights point to the reality of cultural hybridity in many post-colonial communities (Canagarajah, 2005; May, 2005). Canagarajah (2005), for instance, states that in the context of globalization “the debate about the relative status of local and dominant languages poses serious policy problems for post-colonial communities” (p. 418). Furthermore, debates on language and education policy and planning in post-colonial settings typically pivot around “mother tongue versus English” (May, 2005; Pennycook, 2002)<sup>1</sup> where the mother tongue may in fact be the dominant language spoken by the majority population, leaving the mother tongue languages spoken by minority Indigenous peoples, and their language practices, marginalized or rendered invisible (Sellwood & Angelo, 2013; Wigglesworth, Simpson, & Vaughan, 2018).

In this paper we look at language and education policy in two contrasting post-colonial nations: Australia and Malaysia. Both countries have small indigenous minority populations who, as speakers of a minority language as their mother tongue, are embedded in a dominant language context.<sup>2</sup> We contrast these two diverse geo-political post-colonial settings and posit that in each the language context is historically contingent and ideological. Yet, as is the case for many indigenous peoples around the globe, the indigenous minority populations in both these nations have yet to fully enjoy language rights or even the right to education (Brown & Ganguly, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988; UNESCO, 2010). The lack of recognition is glaring when one considers Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) that states:

- (1) Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
- (2) Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
- (3) States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

As Brown (2003) laments, despite this declaration to protect minority languages and provide education for indigenous peoples, many nations have “failed to follow through on these commitments” (p. 436). In this paper, we examine and compare language and education policies in Australia and Malaysia and explore how policies have affected indigenous minority communities in both nations. Our aim is to compare and contrast ethnolinguistic and educational policies in these two countries and, by doing so, shed light on the complexities of

the minority language rights issue in diverse multicultural and multilingual post-colonial settings.

At first glance Australia and Malaysia do not seem sufficiently similar to warrant a comparison. Australia and Malaysia share a British colonial history, in which the goal of the British Empire was the expansion of English language and Anglo culture to the countries of the empire and beyond (Pennycook, 1998). Australia is now a first-world developed nation with a large and diverse immigrant population. On the other hand, Malaysia is a multiethnic, multilingual developing country with a Malay majority. It is only when one looks at how each country deals with multicultural issues and, moreover, applies policy, especially language and education policy, to its indigenous minority population that the points of similarity and difference sharpen and come to the fore.

The indigenous peoples discussed in this comparative analysis are the Aboriginal Australians in remote regions of Australia and the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia. Our intention is to explore how indigenous peoples have been positioned within each nation's quest for language and education development policies that meet the needs of its diverse multicultural and multilingual population and to further examine the contemporary implications for these two nations' indigenous minority populations.

### **An Overview of Aboriginal Australians and the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia**

Australia has a current population of more than 24 million, while Malaysia's population is estimated at 31 million. Of these numbers, the Indigenous Australian population is 798,381 persons, (or 3.30% of the total population) (ABS, 2017), as compared to approximately 178,000 Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia (or less than 0.6% of the total population). However, in this paper we only focus on the indigenous population in remote areas in Australia and Malaysia. In Australia, about 19% of Aboriginal Australians live in remote or very remote areas (ABS, 2011), while 87.5% of the Orang Asli live in rural or remote Peninsular Malaysia (Population and Housing Census of Malaysia, 2000).

It is important to note that although we use the concept "remote" for comparative purposes, in geographical terms this concept differs in each region. "Remote" in Peninsular Malaysia commonly refers to indigenous peoples who may live one or two hours from nearby towns, but without sealed access roads. By contrast, in Australia a remote community may be up to 12 hours' drive from a regional town, often on dirt roads. Despite spatial remoteness, the majority of Indigenous communities in remote Australia generally have access to piped water supply (99%), electricity (98%), and sewerage (97%) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). In Peninsular Malaysia, however, spatial proximity to regional centers notwithstanding, the Population and Housing Census of Malaysia (2000) indicated that 55.5% of Orang Asli houses did not have treated piped water supply and only 53.3% received electricity. In contrast, data for the year 2000 showed that

95% of the Malaysian population had piped water supply (WHO & UNICEF Report, 2017), while almost 97% of the population had access to electricity in 1994 (The World Bank).

It is understood that Indigenous people have inhabited Australia for at least the last 60,000 years. When English colonization commenced in 1788, Australia's Indigenous population comprised multilingual speakers of an estimated 250 or so distinct languages (McConvell & Thieberger, 2001). Colonization initially took place along the coastal regions of southeastern Australia and slowly spread to the more remote regions. The encounter with Anglo-Australian colonial settler society was typically violent and traumatic and led to a so-called "protectionist" era. From the 1950s, however, the emphasis was on "assimilation" into the mainstream (Rowse, 2005). Nevertheless, Aboriginal people were not considered citizens of their own country until the late 1960s. After 1972 a progressive Labor government quickly brought in much-needed policy reforms. A policy of self-determination, or self-management, saw Indigenous people gaining rights in the areas of employment, governance, and land ownership through Land Rights and later Native Title legislation.

Indigenous groups in Australia are divided into three broad categories: urban, regional, and remote. Today, most Indigenous Australians tend to live in urban or rural regions and suffer poor health, low education achievement, unemployment, and incarceration at rates higher than the majority non-Indigenous population. By contrast, for many Indigenous people in remote central and northern Australia, contact with Anglo-Australian settler society was delayed, with some remote groups continuing a hunter-gatherer existence until the 1950s in Arnhem Land and the 1960s in the Western Desert region. For the most part, they still speak their heritage indigenous languages, and connection to traditional country and cultural practices remains strong. Yet they also suffer high mortality, incarceration, and unemployment rates, as well as poor health and education outcomes. It is these Indigenous language speakers in the Northern Territory and Western Australia that we focus on in this paper.

Of the 250 or so distinct languages spoken in the late 1700s, only some 15-18 so-called "heritage languages" are now being learned by children as their first language, while the majority of the original Australian languages have no remaining full or fluent speakers (Marmion, Obata, & Troy, 2014). Heritage languages that are still actively spoken, even by children, include Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Yolŋu Matha in the Northern Territory and the Western Desert dialects, including Ngaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara, in Western Australia. Additionally, so-called "contact languages" are spoken by many Indigenous Australians, for example, Roper River Kriol in the Northern Territory and Kimberley Kriol in Western Australia. Such contact languages arose as a consequence of language contact and language shift, processes brought about by Australia's colonization history (Koch & Nordlinger, 2014).

As for the Orang Asli, they are the descendants of people who occupied the Malay Peninsula before the Malay kingdoms during the second millennium A.D. Until about the first millennium A.D., the Orang Asli kept to themselves although

there were some, often violent, interactions between Orang Asli and other ethnic groups, mainly the Malays (Nicholas, 2000). Although the term Orang Asli implies a homogenous group, it is not. For administrative purposes, they are divided into three main groups: Negrito, Senoi, and Melayu-Asli (Aboriginal-Malays). These groups are again divided into 18 sub-groups. Despite being categorized as Orang Asli, these subgroups are distinct communities that differ in physical appearance, living areas, economic activities, cultural practices, and languages spoken. The Negritos, the smallest group and earliest inhabitants, were largely nomadic foragers. They speak the Northern Aslian division of the Aslian family of Mon-Khmer languages (Benjamin, 1999). The largest group, the Senoi, was mainly swidden farmers and depended on forest resources. They speak Austro-Asiatic languages of the Mon-Khmer subgroup. Lastly, the Melayu-Asli (Aboriginal Malays) are mainly engaged in permanent agriculture or river and coastal fishing. They speak an archaic variant of the Malay language.

Ethnic categorization in Malaysia is important. Significantly, however, prior to 1960, *Orang Asli* as an ethnic category did not exist. It was only during the 1948-1960 "Emergency" in the war against the Communist Party of Malaya that the Orang Asli was officially recognized by the Malaysian government. Communist insurgents hiding in the deep jungles of Peninsular Malaya befriended the Orang Asli in order to obtain food and information. The government of Malaya realized that the Orang Asli needed protection against the insurgents if the war against the Communists was to be won. It was in 1961, during this Emergency period, that the government established the Department of Aborigines, later called the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli or JHEOA),<sup>3</sup> and enacted the Aboriginal Peoples Ordinance (1954). This ordinance was "the first important attempt at legislation to protect the Orang Asli" (Carey, 1976, p. 293) and legally defines the position of the Orang Asli. Although later revised as the Aboriginal Peoples Act (1974), this legislation still treats the Orang Asli as people needing the "protection" of authorities to safeguard their wellbeing. JHEOA used to have extensive control over Orang Asli as if they "cannot do anything without the guidance and permission of the JHEOA" (Nicholas, 2000, p. 71), thus undermining their autonomy. However, at present, this department's main objective, although somewhat paternalistic, is to develop the Orang Asli communities while upholding their heritage.

### **Government Policies towards Multiculturalism and Diversity**

As noted above, both Australia and Malaysia are multilingual, multicultural countries although ethnic identification is a more important identity marker in Malaysia than it is in Australia. Each of these countries comprises many diverse cultures and languages, including those of the indigenous and ethnic minorities.

Australia is an immigrant country with a population originating from more than 185 countries. In fact, the 2016 Census indicates that some 49% of the population were born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas (mostly

originating from English-speaking countries). The 2016 Census also indicates that 3.3% of the Australian population is Indigenous. Of that group, 10.5% speak an Indigenous language at home. However, in the Northern Territory with the largest percentage of Indigenous people per capita, where contact with settler society has been more recent, 15.3% speak an Indigenous language at home and most speak English as a second language.

On the other hand, Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia) has three main ethnic groups: Malays (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), and Indians (7.3%). Although the majority Malay population is often identified as the native population of Malaysia, it is actually the Orang Asli who were the earliest inhabitants in Peninsular Malaysia. In fact, the literal translation of Orang Asli is “Original People.” Almost all Orang Asli speak their own indigenous languages, but many of them are also well-versed in Malay, the national language of Malaysia.

Each nation now comprises a diverse multicultural and multilingual population. Although Australia and Malaysia share a British colonial history, they differ in their policy approach to multiculturalism and diversity. In what follows we explore how, from a policy perspective, the colonial legacy played out in these two contrasting countries.

In Australia, early immigrants were predominantly British, and the dominance of Anglophone culture prevailed well into the twentieth century. This was reinforced by the notorious “White Australia” policy or Federal Immigration Act 1901 that officially protected the majority “White” population by restricting immigration by non-English speaking groups and those not of European descent. It was not until the late 1940s that an unprecedented wave of post-World War II European refugees began entering Australia, thus presenting a challenge to the now-disgraced White Australia policy (1901-1969) and Anglo-Australia’s homogenous, monolingual identity (Scarino, 2014). Despite its increasingly multicultural population, Australia remained predominantly monolingual until an ideology of pluralism came about following the election of a federal Labor government (1972-1975). This period saw the introduction of much-needed social reforms across the political spectrum, but especially in attitudes to race and linguistic and cultural identity (particularly in the Indigenous sector). The Racial Discrimination Act was passed in 1975, and by the late 1970s racial origin was no longer a criterion in Australia’s national immigration policy. In fact, the 1970s represented a halcyon era of multiculturalism where cultural and linguistic diversity was celebrated. Subsequent decades have seen the arrival of economic and humanitarian refugees predominantly from Asia, Africa, and more recently Iraq and Afghanistan, leading to more linguistic diversity but in a time of less social inclusion (cf. Piller, 2014). Nevertheless, contemporary Australian society has grown out of British and European notions of democracy and the free development of civil society (Fletcher, 1997), underpinned by notions of equity in which everyone can succeed through individual effort and education.

As for Malaysia, the ideal of a multicultural and pluralistic society is complex and multifaceted. According to Goh and Holden (2009), Malaysia practices “postcolonial multiculturalism” that differs from the form of liberal multiculturalism

understood in Western societies. The British colonial policy of “divide and rule” emphasized division among the different ethnic groups. Even now, as stated earlier, ethnic identification plays an important role. The official ethnic classifications (i.e., Malay, Chinese, and Indian) reflect differences not only in language and culture, but also in political, economic, social, and educational power among the different ethnic groups. Although Malaysia as a multiethnic country is governed through a democratic system, it does not practice social equality among the various ethnic groups. In fact, the Malaysian government practices explicit policies of ethnic preference, which favor the majority ethnic community, the Malays. Policies introduced after 1969 to reduce economic and educational disparities between Malays and non-Malays also entailed the development of the classification *Bumiputera*, literally meaning “sons of the soil.” This term encompasses the Malays and the minority indigenous peoples of Malaysia, whereas non-Bumiputera refers to the Chinese and Indians. Special privileges are given to Bumiputera, especially in education, employment, business, and administrative services. Moreover, to maintain harmony, Malaysian legislation prohibits the questioning of “sensitive issues,” including the special privileges given to Bumiputera. Although these special privileges are extended to the indigenous communities, in reality, many Orang Asli are not aware of them.

### Language and Education Policy

We now turn to language and education policies in Australia and Malaysia to discuss how such policies are inextricably linked to political ideologies over different eras and how ideology has driven language planning. As Luke, McHoul, and Mey (1990) point out, language policy and planning have often “reflected the political and economic imperatives of particular social groups rather than what can be construed as linguistic or cultural concerns per se” (p. 4).

Australia is to this day a predominantly monolingual country with English remaining the official language for all legal, government, and official functions, although “a significant proportion of the Australian population, at least in the cities, is bi- or multilingual” (Clyne, 2005, p. 20). Australia, as Clyne (2005) argues, has a “monolingual mindset” (p. 23). Language policy, or lack thereof, has been linked to the dominant political ideology of past eras, whereas, as noted above, migrants and the Indigenous minority were expected to assimilate into the Anglo-Australian majority culture.

Demands for an official language policy in Australia that took account of cultural and linguistic diversity emerged only in the 1970s. This drove the introduction of language policy in the 1980s that reflected the federal government’s desire to foster multiculturalism. With the National Policy on Languages (LoBianco, 1987) Australia was celebrated as the “first English speaking country to have such a policy and the first in the world to have a multilingual languages policy” (LoBianco & Wickert, 2001, p. 29). By the 1990s, however, education and language policy began to reflect a more conservative ideology that saw the withdrawal of support

for multiculturalism and pluralism and the onset of a conservative approach to refugees, immigration, and Indigenous affairs. New policies shifted the emphasis away from a focus on community and multiculturalism to a focus on the economy (McKay, 2001) and English and Asian languages, thereby linking Asian languages to trade and tourism and English language and literacy to education, training, and employment (LoBianco & Wickert 2001, p. 28).<sup>4</sup> Over the last decade the National Literacy and Numeracy Plan has ushered in an era of external benchmarking testing and standards of competency, and a back-to-basics approach to literacy pedagogy under the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) introduced in 2008.<sup>5</sup>

Malaysian language and education policy is unashamedly underpinned by political ideology. At the time of independence, the Malaysian education system reflected the colonial policy of “divide and rule” of the three main ethnic groups: English-medium for primary, secondary, and higher education; Chinese-medium for both primary and secondary education; and Malay-medium and Tamil-medium for primary education only.

During the British rule and at independence, English language played a dominant role in Malaysia. While it may be assumed that the promotion and enforcement of colonial language was a cornerstone of colonial rule, as Pennycook notes (2002), “vernacular” education in Malay was later promoted as a strategy for “social control” (Pennycook, 1998, p. 99) to preserve the Malay as Bumiputera or “a son of the soil” (Pennycook, 1998, p. 58). After independence, the Malay language gradually replaced English as the status language. The new government regarded English not only as the language of colonization, but also as an obstacle for the progress of the majority of Malays in educational, social, and economic aspects of the country (Chai, 1971). As the former Prime Minister of Malaysia stated, “In the struggle to uphold their language, the Malays were forced to oppose and cast aside the English language” (Mohamad, 1986, p. 43). Now, however, the government believes that it is important for a developing country like Malaysia to be part of the global economy, and thus sufficient proficiency in English as an international language is expected from Malaysians. English therefore remains the next most important language after Malay.

Furthermore, the Malaysian government’s provision for the use of vernacular languages (of the three main ethnic groups) as the medium of instruction in schools is reflected in the establishment of National and National-type schools. All National schools use Malay as the medium of instruction, and English as a second language is taught as a compulsory subject, whereas National-type schools use either Chinese (Mandarin) or Tamil as the medium of instruction; and English and Malay are taught as compulsory subjects. Although the medium of instruction can differ in National and National-type schools, all schools use a single national education curriculum. In addition, depending on the number of students in National schools, other languages such as Mandarin, Tamil, and Arabic are taught from Year 3. For secondary education, there is only Malay-medium public education. Private Chinese secondary schools use Mandarin as the medium of instruction, but there are no secondary Tamil-medium schools.

In summary, we acknowledge that the current language and education policies in Australia need major improvement, and Malaysia needs better policies. These elements notwithstanding, we will now explore the present state of language and education of the indigenous minorities in both of these countries. Without a doubt, language and education provision for Australia's Indigenous population could be much improved. By comparison, however, the situation in Malaysia is far worse, with extremely limited language and education provision for the Orang Asli community.

In Australia, colonization led to a dramatic decline in the originally estimated 250-odd Indigenous languages (McConvell & Thieberger, 2001). In eastern Australia where colonization came early, those of Indigenous descent now speak English as their mother tongue. In other regions, Aboriginal English and English-based creoles (or "Kriols") have emerged, whereas in the very remote regions of central and northern Australia some Indigenous heritage languages remain the lingua franca. Of the 145 Indigenous languages still spoken in Australia, 110 are critically endangered. In fact, all of Australia's Indigenous languages face an uncertain future if immediate action and care are not taken (Marmion et al., 2014).

In the remote regions of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, Indigenous languages or Kriols are still spoken as home languages. Low school attendance, poor retention rates, and low literacy and numeracy outcomes typically mark Indigenous education across Australia. Until the 1960s or later, most children living in remote regions either received no schooling or were educated in mission schools (Gale, 1997), and secondary schooling options remain limited or non-existent. In Western Australia, Aboriginal students were excluded from state schools well into the 1930s and later. After the passing of the Education Act in 1945, better educational opportunities prevailed. Under the assimilation policy of the 1950s and 60s, Western Australia used education to bring Aboriginal people up to a satisfactory social standard for eligibility for employment and ultimately citizenship (Haebich, 2005). Nevertheless, in the late 1960s, the adult "full-blood" population of Western Australia was reportedly "almost completely illiterate" (Department of Native Welfare, 1967, p. 32). In the Northern Territory, although some children had been educated in the few mission schools, government responsibility for the education of Aboriginal children commenced only in the 1950s. In some communities, government schooling was not available until the 1970s or later, and three decades later it was still understood that a percentage of Aboriginal children were not enrolled in any school (Hoogenraad, 2001).

Recognition of the need to preserve and maintain Australia's Indigenous languages and foster language transmission to the next generation grew throughout the 1980s. In tandem with education initiatives, government funding was made available for Aboriginal community radio and television broadcasting, interpreter/translating services, and specialized "Language Centers." The 1970s and 80s saw the introduction of a policy of bilingual education for schools in Aboriginal communities in South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory (Hartman & Henderson, 1994). In the Northern Territory, by the mid-1980s, some 20 schools were delivering formally accredited bilingual programs

(Collins, 1999, p.121). The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy was launched in 1989 with an explicit agenda to support and maintain Aboriginal languages. The 1990s saw numerous Indigenous language policy initiatives, including the 1996 launch of the national Australian Indigenous Languages Framework curriculum. By the late 1990s, however, the focus had shifted to English literacy and the competencies required to function in mainstream society. This was coupled with waning government support for bilingual education. Finally, in 2008 the Northern Territory government announced a policy change focused on teaching in English in order to “improve attendance rates and lift the literacy and numeracy results” in remote Indigenous schools, thus effectively dismantling what remained of the bilingual education program (Simpson, Caffery, & McConvell, 2009, p. 15). The earlier language rights approach to Indigenous education in remote regions has now been replaced by a discourse of crisis attributed to the literacy “problem” and unemployment and welfare dependency due to poor education and lack of English (i.e., literacy), although lobbying around the parlous state of Indigenous languages resulted in the 2009 National Indigenous Languages Policy and a Parliamentary report on “Language Learning in Indigenous Communities” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). Currently the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2011) is tasked with developing Australian Indigenous languages but has not yet developed any language-specific Indigenous curriculum, not even for the most vital and populous of Indigenous Australian languages. The only differentiation pertains at the level of language vitality, with separate pathways for L1 speakers, L2 learners, and language revival contexts (ACARA, n.d.). Should they wish to teach an Indigenous language, as it now stands, individual schools have to painstakingly research and develop language-specific content for themselves. Examples of successful initiatives include some language revival programs in NSW.<sup>6</sup>

In Malaysia, although language and education policies acknowledge the needs of the minority immigrant population (Chinese and Indians), as stated earlier, there is limited recognition of the needs of the Orang Asli. For a long time education for the Orang Asli was not a priority of JHEOA. Initially, Orang Asli children attended three years in village schools taught by JHEOA staff who were not trained teachers, and Malay language was the medium of instruction. Children then proceeded on to primary schools in larger Orang Asli communities where trained teachers were provided by the Ministry of Education. Those who passed primary education at Year 6 went on to secondary mainstream public schools in nearby rural or urban areas. This system saw a huge dropout rate at both the primary and secondary level. It was only in 1995 that JHEOA handed the responsibility of Orang Asli education to the Ministry of Education. In 2001, all Orang Asli schools came under the Ministry, and classes were thus taught by trained teachers. Although data from the Ministry of Education and JAKOA (2015) have shown increased school enrolment for Orang Asli children, retention rates are still low. At the time of the 2000 census, some 86 % of rural Orang Asli had had either no schooling or primary schooling only. It was reported that in 2016, the school dropout rate for Orang Asli children was 17.9% (The Star Online, 2016).

Poverty is also considered to be a contributing factor in poor school retention and outcomes among Orang Asli children (Nicholas, 2006). Some 35.2% of Orang Asli were classified as “hardcore poor,” compared to the national rate of 1.4% (Nicholas & Baer, 2007, p. 119). Concomitantly, Orang Asli children are reported to have low self-esteem and negative attitudes towards education, and the majority of parents are believed to be ignorant of the importance of education (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development Malaysia, 2005).

The current national curriculum adopted by all Malaysian public schools does not address the needs of Orang Asli children. This is further complicated by the fact that all Orang Asli schools use Malay as the medium of instruction whereas at home Orang Asli children speak their indigenous first language. Although the National Language Policy established Malay as the national language, it also made provision for schools to teach other mother tongue languages, providing parents requested it and there were a minimum of 15 students per class (Smith, 2003). In 1997, the Central Curriculum Committee approved the use of Semai language (the mother tongue language of the Semai people) in selected Orang Asli schools; however, this has not been successful as Semai is used only in language maintenance activities rather than as the medium of instruction. There are also very few trained Orang Asli teachers, and most non-Orang Asli teachers have little exposure to, and knowledge of, the Orang Asli community. Thus, the whole experience of schooling for Orang Asli children is removed from their daily experiences within the home community.

### **A Critical Analysis of the Education and Language Policies for Indigenous Minorities**

In this section we analyze the consequences of education and language policies for the indigenous minorities in Australia and Malaysia. Both countries have a contemporary national identity that has developed out of the legacy of British colonialism. In Australia, despite multicultural aspirations, English language and Anglo-European culture dominate. In Malaysia, although there is acknowledgment of ethnic diversity among its population, the national identity reflects that of the Malay majority.

The situation for the indigenous minority in Malaysia is similar to that experienced in Indigenous communities in remote Australia where the medium of instruction is typically not the mother tongue. In Malaysia, public schools use only Malay language as the medium of instruction. The Orang Asli languages are given only a minimal form of educational recognition, functioning only as an identity marker for the Orang Asli communities. This is because the Orang Asli languages are believed to be rather limited for any serious educational achievements. In Australia, Indigenous languages may have been used as the medium in bilingual programs of the past (Devlin, Disbray, & Devlin, 2017); however, there is debate as to the effect of Aboriginal languages on successful academic achievements (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012).

Australia and Malaysia have dealt with their indigenous minorities differently. Australia has had specific education policies for its Indigenous population, whereas Malaysia has hardly any form of provision for the Orang Asli. Despite more progressive education policies for the indigenous minority population in Australia than Malaysia, socio-economic outcomes for the indigenous populations in both countries are poor.

By contrast, although immigrant languages in Australia and Malaysia may have lower status than the acknowledged official languages English and Malay, they are certainly accorded more status than indigenous languages. In addition, although both Australia and Malaysia acknowledge their multicultural and multilingual population, fewer educational opportunities are provided for the Indigenous minorities compared to the immigrant population. In both countries education for the immigrant population is linked to the national language (i.e., English in Australia, and Malay and English in Malaysia). However, education for the indigenous population in these countries is linked not only to the national language, but also to an agenda aimed at mainstreaming the indigenous minorities (cf. Altman & Hinkson, 2007). Even though Australia has provided education for their Indigenous citizens for far longer than is the case in Malaysia, in both countries indigenous students continue to perform far below their non-indigenous counterparts. As noted previously, some groups in remote Australia may speak their heritage languages but still have similar educational issues as urban Indigenous people in part because of few educational opportunities in the home language, but also because of education discrimination. It remains therefore, that even though in pluralist societies such as Australia and Malaysia multiculturalism and multilingualism are acknowledged, indigenous languages are not recognized as meriting serious academic attention.

### **The Dignity of Difference**

The practices discussed in this paper indicate that although both countries promote multicultural ideals, they fall short in their acknowledgement of the dignity of difference for their indigenous communities. Often notions such as equity and opportunity are stressed in discussions relating to the minority populations. However, we argue that such notions are used to disguise national intolerance to the differences that exist in dealing with indigenous minority issues. Moreover, although these countries emphasize the importance of education and language as vehicles to achieve “equity,” equity is defined in mainstream terms. However, education and language policy in each country favors the mainstream majority population.

In the Australian context, Anglo Australians still carry the legacy of the colonial past, that is, the assumed superiority of English and Western values. In the Malaysian context, the Orang Asli are commonly regarded as “primitive” and thus requiring “development” (Daniels, 2005; Farooqui, 2015; Idrus, 2011). Malaysia explicitly practices assimilationist approaches towards the Orang Asli

with the objective of absorbing them into the dominant Malay culture, while Australia cloaks its assimilationist interventions under the guise of “mainstreaming” or “closing the gap” in equities between its Indigenous and non-Indigenous population (Altman & Hinkson, 2007). Further, this paper highlights that although Malaysia acknowledges diversity in its ethnic population, this is not extended to the Orang Asli community. As we note, the minority immigrant populations in Malaysia, namely the Chinese and Indians, are given more recognition than the Orang Asli. Unlike the Orang Asli, Malaysian Chinese and Indians have their own mother tongue language schools. In addition, Chinese and Indian traditions are often featured as the multicultural diversity Malaysia celebrates, whereas Orang Asli traditions are exemplified as “exotic” but at the same time causing the community to remain backward (Idrus, 2011, p. 58).

Finally, we emphasize the crucial role that education plays in overcoming disadvantage and providing opportunities for all people in all societies. While we recognize the important role played by the family and community in transmitting the values and habits that lead to successful school outcomes and literacy acquisition, we also note that the importance of valuing cultural and linguistic difference and diversity in the attainment of educational outcomes. As we have shown here, there is much diversity among culturally different communities in Australia and Malaysia. Therefore, education and language policies for indigenous and ethnic minorities in these respective countries must acknowledge the importance of difference and include indigenous cultural ways of knowing, being, and doing in the acquisition of successful educational outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have addressed the question of language rights and education by focusing on indigenous minorities in two contrasting post-colonial contexts. While a language rights approach to education in minority language settings may be an admirable aim (UNESCO, 2003), achieving equity in educational provision is, as we have shown here, complex, ideologically driven, and historically contingent. Nevertheless, the loss of minority languages through assimilation into the dominant majority culture is contributing to the loss of linguistic diversity worldwide. Moreover, as Mohanty and Misra (2000) argue, the “denial of rights of the speakers of minority mother tongues and ‘nonstandard’ varieties” to use their languages or be taught in their languages may also lead to “educational failure and lack of social mobility” (p.34). The question thus remains: Will education and integration of indigenous minorities into the majority culture in post-colonial settings result in socio-economic mobility or result only in the loss of linguistic diversity and ongoing marginalization from the dominant mainstream?

### Notes

1. See also *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* (Issue 3, Number 2) published in 2004.
2. Throughout this paper “indigenous” is written with both lower case and capital “I.” Indigenous Australians prefer the use of capital “I” to refer themselves and their language and we observe this practice. In all other instances we use lower case “i.”
3. JHEOA is currently known as The Department for Orang Asli Development (JAKOA = Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli)
4. As exemplified in the 1991 Australia’s Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (1991) and the 1997 Commonwealth Literacy Policy.
5. In 2008 NAPLAN commenced in Australian schools with all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 assessed using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation), and Numeracy. Data from the NAPLAN test results give schools and systems the ability to compare their students’ achievements against national standards and the monitoring of progress over time. As a consequence, ESL and other non-mainstream learners are assessed in literacy according to the same developmental pathway for literacy achievement set by English first language students. This has led to a loss of ESL expertise and understanding amongst teachers of the complexities of teaching non-English speaking students from migrant or Indigenous backgrounds (McKay, 2001; Piller, 2016, pp. 117-122).
6. See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/may/25/australia-developing-first-ever-school-curriculum-for-indigenous-languages>.

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