

The Application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory in Managing Indigenous Students and Its Implications for Student Holistic Development

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Abstract

This study investigates how the application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs informs the management of Indigenous (Orang Asli) students in Malaysian schools and examines its implications for students' holistic development. Grounded in the persistent educational disparities faced by Indigenous learners, the study emphasises the role of school leadership particularly headmasters in addressing students' fundamental and psychosocial needs as a foundation for meaningful learning. Using a quantitative survey design, data were collected from 342 teachers serving in Orang Asli primary schools across selected regions in Malaysia. The findings indicate that student needs management practices based on Maslow's framework are implemented at a high level, particularly in the domains of physiological support, safety, social belonging, esteem, and opportunities for self-development. In parallel, students' holistic development encompassing academic achievement, co-curricular participation, and personal character was also reported at a high level. Inferential analysis further revealed a significant positive relationship between the management of student needs and holistic student development, suggesting that effective fulfilment of basic and higher-order needs contributes meaningfully to students' overall educational outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of contextualised leadership practices that prioritise students' well-being alongside instructional goals. The study contributes empirical evidence to the discourse on inclusive educational leadership and highlights the relevance of Maslow's theory as a practical framework for enhancing educational equity and holistic development among marginalised Indigenous students.

Keywords: student needs management, Orang Asli education, headmaster leadership, holistic student development, Maslow's hierarchy, indigenous students.

INTRODUCTION

The Education plays a central role in national human capital development; however, equitable access to quality education remains a persistent challenge for marginalised communities. In Malaysia, Indigenous students, commonly referred to as Orang Asli, continue to experience structural disadvantages that affect their educational participation and outcomes (Mohd Salim et al., 2020). These challenges are often rooted in socioeconomic vulnerability, geographical isolation, limited access to basic facilities, and sociocultural dissonance between home and school environments (Muhammad & Mydin Kutty, 2021). As a result, educational interventions that focus solely on curriculum delivery and academic performance may be insufficient to address the broader needs of Indigenous learners (Mohamad Shah et al., 2020).

Recent educational discourse has increasingly highlighted the importance of adopting holistic and inclusive approaches to student development, particularly for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Dong et al., 2022). Holistic education extends beyond academic achievement to encompass students' emotional well-being, social integration, self-worth, and personal growth (Ali et al., 2025). For Indigenous students, whose lived experiences may differ substantially from mainstream schooling norms, the fulfilment of basic and psychosocial needs becomes a critical prerequisite for meaningful engagement with learning processes (Meng Li & Mydin Kutty, 2023). Failure to address these needs may contribute to issues such as low attendance, limited motivation, disengagement, and early school withdrawal. Within this context, school leadership assumes a pivotal role in shaping educational environments that are responsive to students' diverse needs. Headmasters, as instructional and administrative leaders, influence how school policies, resources, and practices are aligned with students' welfare and development (Al Ghaithi et al., 2025). Effective leadership in Indigenous schools therefore requires an understanding of students' lived realities and the capacity to translate this understanding into purposeful management practices (Shanmugam et al., 2024). Leadership that prioritises student well-being alongside instructional goals has been shown to foster more supportive school climates, enhance teacher responsiveness, and promote sustained student engagement (Persaud et al., 2025).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a relevant theoretical lens for examining student needs management in educational settings. The theory conceptualises human motivation as a progression from basic physiological needs and safety to higher-order needs such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). When applied to schooling contexts, Maslow's framework suggests that students' capacity to learn is closely linked to the extent to which their fundamental and psychological needs are met. For Indigenous students, whose access to food security, safe learning environments, emotional support, and social acceptance may be inconsistent, the relevance of this framework becomes particularly salient (Haris et al., 2021). Despite its widespread use in educational psychology, empirical studies that explicitly examine the application of Maslow's theory within Indigenous schooling contexts remain limited, particularly in the Malaysian setting. Existing research on Orang Asli education has predominantly focused on academic achievement gaps, dropout rates, and structural barriers, with comparatively less attention given to how school-level management practices address students' hierarchical needs in a systematic manner (Yew et al., 2021). This gap suggests a need for empirical investigation into how student needs management, grounded in a recognised motivational framework, may influence holistic student development.

Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the extent to which Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is applied in managing Indigenous students in Malaysian primary schools and to explore its implications for students' holistic development. By empirically analysing the relationship between student needs management practices and holistic developmental outcomes, this study aims to contribute to the growing discourse on inclusive educational leadership. The findings are expected to inform school leaders, policymakers, and educators on the importance of integrating student-centred and needs-based management approaches in efforts to improve educational equity and long-term outcomes for Indigenous learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indigenous students across many countries continue to face persistent educational inequalities that are closely linked to historical marginalisation, socioeconomic disadvantage, and cultural dissonance between community practices and formal schooling systems (Huaman, 2020). In the Malaysian context, Orang Asli students are frequently associated with lower enrolment rates, inconsistent attendance, limited academic achievement, and higher risks of early school withdrawal (Saifullah, 2022). These outcomes are often attributed not only to material deprivation but also to broader psychosocial and environmental factors that shape students' engagement with schooling. Previous studies have highlighted that Orang Asli learners commonly experience challenges related to poverty, food insecurity, inadequate housing, limited access to healthcare, and geographical isolation (Nordin et al., 2018). Such conditions directly affect students' readiness to learn and their ability to sustain participation in school activities. Moreover, cultural differences in communication styles, learning preferences, and community values may further complicate students' adaptation to mainstream schooling environments (Burgess & Harwood, 2023). When these contextual realities are insufficiently recognised by schools, Indigenous students may experience feelings of alienation, low self-esteem, and reduced motivation, which in turn hinder their holistic development.

The concept of holistic student development has gained increasing prominence in contemporary educational discourse, particularly in relation to inclusive and equitable education (Fong et al., 2021). Holistic development refers to the balanced growth of students across multiple domains, including academic, social, emotional, moral, and physical dimensions (Hill et al., 2020). Rather than viewing academic achievement as an isolated outcome, holistic approaches emphasise the interdependence between cognitive development and students' well-being, character formation, and social competence (Ma'rof et al., 2021). For Indigenous students, holistic development is especially relevant due to the complex interplay between home environments, community norms, and school expectations (Andrews et al., 2023). Research suggests that educational initiatives that prioritise emotional safety, social belonging, and positive identity formation are more likely to support sustained engagement among marginalised learners. Conversely, educational practices that neglect students' emotional and social needs may inadvertently reinforce disengagement, even when academic support is provided (Mohd Noor & Abd Razak, 2022). This underscores the importance of adopting development-oriented frameworks that recognise students as whole individuals rather than solely as academic performers.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has long been recognised as a foundational theory in understanding human motivation and behaviour. The theory posits that individuals are motivated by a sequence of needs, beginning with basic physiological requirements, followed by safety, love and belonging, esteem, and ultimately self-actualisation. Within educational settings, this framework has been used to explain how unmet basic and psychological needs can constrain students' capacity to focus, engage, and achieve academically. When applied to schooling contexts, Maslow's theory suggests that effective learning environments must first ensure that students' fundamental needs such as nutrition, physical safety, and emotional security are adequately addressed. Only when these needs are met can students meaningfully engage with higher-order learning tasks that require confidence, autonomy, and self-directed motivation. Several studies have demonstrated that students who perceive their learning environments as safe, supportive, and inclusive are more likely to display positive learning behaviours, higher motivation, and stronger academic persistence.

Although Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been widely applied in general educational research, its explicit application within Indigenous education contexts remains relatively underexplored. Existing studies on Indigenous learners tend to focus on academic performance gaps, literacy outcomes, and structural barriers, with limited emphasis on how schools systematically manage students' hierarchical needs. This represents a significant gap, particularly given the heightened vulnerability of Indigenous students to unmet basic and psychosocial needs. In the context of Orang Asli education, fulfilling physiological needs such as food provision, transportation, and access to basic facilities has been identified as a critical foundation for learning (Nordin et al., 2020). Safety needs, including physical protection, emotional security, and freedom from discrimination, further influence students' willingness to attend school and participate actively in classroom activities (Nordin et al., 2018). At higher levels, the need for belonging and esteem is closely linked to students' sense of acceptance, cultural recognition, and positive relationships with teachers and peers. When these needs are neglected, students may experience diminished self-worth and disengagement, limiting their potential for self-development and long-term educational success (Kamsin & Khalid, 2023).

School leadership plays a crucial role in translating theoretical frameworks such as Maslow's hierarchy into practical management strategies. Headmasters Headteachers are uniquely positioned to influence how school resources, policies, and practices are aligned with students' needs (Kouni et al., 2018) . Leadership that is responsive to students' socioeconomic and cultural contexts can foster school environments that prioritise care, inclusion, and holistic growth (Williams, 2020). Research on educational leadership increasingly emphasises the importance of needs-based and student-centred approaches, particularly in schools serving disadvantaged communities. Effective leaders are those who recognise that addressing students' basic and psychological needs is not peripheral to academic success but integral to it (Thien et al., 2023). In Indigenous school settings, leadership practices that emphasise collaboration with communities, culturally responsive decision-making, and targeted support mechanisms have been associated with improved student engagement and well-being (Martin et al., 2021).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of holistic and inclusive education, empirical evidence examining the relationship between student needs management and holistic development among Indigenous students in Malaysia remains limited. Specifically, there is a lack of quantitative studies that operationalise Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a structured

framework for managing Indigenous students and empirically test its association with holistic developmental outcomes. This gap highlights the need for systematic investigation into how needs-based management practices implemented at the school level may influence the academic, social, and personal development of Orang Asli students.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative design with a correlational research approach to examine the relationship between the student needs management practices of headmasters and the level of success of Orang Asli students. This design was chosen to enable researchers to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between the variables studied without manipulation of the independent variables. Data were collected cross-sectionally through questionnaires developed specifically based on the research constructs.

The study population includes primary school teachers serving in schools located within Orang Asli community settlements in Peninsular Malaysia. The selection of the study sample was carried out using a combination of cluster random sampling and stratified random sampling techniques to ensure a balanced representation for each zone involved. The sample size was determined based on the table, with a population totaling 1,720 people, the recommended sample size is around 313 people, but in order to increase the reliability of the data, this study involved $n = 342$ teachers.

The data were collected through the physical distribution of questionnaires and returned to the researcher via postal services. The participating schools were contacted in advance to obtain administrative approval, and the distribution was carried out in collaboration with the District Education Office (PPD) and the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA). Respondents were provided with an explanation regarding the purpose of the study and assurances of the confidentiality of the information provided. All data were collected over a period of six weeks.

The data analysis in this study was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 30.0. Descriptive analysis aimed to describe the distribution of scores, mean values, and standard deviations for each variable involved in the study. The interpretation method for these values followed the guidelines recommended by (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) in their work *Psychometric Theory* (Third Edition), which emphasizes the importance of internal consistency and score distribution in evaluating the reliability of research instruments.

Inferential analysis was conducted using the Pearson Correlation Test to determine the strength and direction of the linear relationship between the variable of student needs management practices by the headmaster and the level of holistic student development among Orang Asli students. The correlation coefficient (r) obtained was interpreted based on the criteria proposed by (Cohen et al., 2011).

This study received approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee and the Ministry of Education Malaysia. All respondents were provided with an informed consent form and were informed that their participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. All information and data

collected were handled with strict confidentiality and were used solely for academic research purposes.

RESULTS

This section reports the findings derived from the analysis of data collected from 342 teachers serving in national primary schools situated within Orang Asli settlements across Peninsular Malaysia. The analysis was conducted using both descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. To determine the strength and direction of the relationship between headmasters' practices in managing students' needs and the level of holistic student outcomes among Orang Asli students, Pearson's correlation analysis was employed.

Level of Student Needs Management Practices

All The descriptive analysis revealed that all constructs examined achieved mean scores ranging from 4.01 to 5.00, reflecting a high level of practice in accordance with the classification framework proposed by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Under this guideline, mean values within this range are interpreted as indicating a high level, whereas lower mean ranges correspond to moderate or low levels of practice. As presented in Table 1, the management of esteem needs emerged as the most prominent construct, recording the highest mean score of 4.71 with a standard deviation of 0.43. This was followed closely by the management of safety needs, which yielded a mean of 4.70 and a standard deviation of 0.43. The management of self-actualisation needs also demonstrated a high level, with a mean score of 4.67 and a standard deviation of 0.45. In contrast, the management of love and belonging needs recorded a slightly lower mean of 4.56, while the management of basic needs showed the lowest mean value at 4.43. Nevertheless, all constructs remained within the high category as defined by the adopted classification.

Table 1 Level of Student Needs Management Practices

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	Score Interpretation
Basic Needs Management Practice	4.43	0.63	High
Safety Needs Management Practice	4.70	0.43	High
Love and Belonging Needs Management Practice	4.56	0.51	High
Self-Esteem Needs Management Practice	4.71	0.43	High
Self-Actualization Needs Management Practice	4.67	0.45	High

The Level of Holistic Student Development

The level of holistic student development among Orang Asli pupils, based on three main components academic achievement, co-curricular achievement, and personal conduct is presented in Table 2. These three components were analyzed based on the mean and standard deviation values, followed by score interpretation.

Table 2 The Level of Holistic Student Development

Component of Student Outcomes	Mean	Standard Deviation	Score Interpretation
Academic Achievement	4.09	0.67	High
Co-curricular Achievement	4.47	0.49	High
Character Development	4.34	0.57	High

Firstly, the academic achievement component recorded a mean of 4.09 with a standard deviation of 0.67. This value indicates that Orang Asli pupils have a high level of academic achievement. Although this mean is the lowest compared to the other two components, it still falls within the high category, suggesting that Orang Asli pupils demonstrate success in academic learning.

Secondly, for co-curricular achievement, the recorded mean was 4.47 the highest among the three components with a standard deviation of 0.49. This shows that Orang Asli pupils are very active and excel in participating in out-of-classroom activities such as sports, clubs, and societies. The level of participation and achievement in co-curricular activities reflects a balanced development of students beyond academics.

Thirdly, personal conduct recorded a mean of 4.34 with a standard deviation of 0.57. This score also falls within the high category, indicating that Orang Asli pupils exhibit good behavior and personal values such as discipline, respect, and responsibility.

Overall, all components of Orang Asli students' holistic development are at a high level, with the highest achievement in the co-curricular domain, followed by personal conduct and then academics.

The Relationship between Student Needs Management Practices and the Holistic Development of Orang Asli Students

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis, as shown in Table 3, revealed a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.411$ with a significance value of $p < 0.001$. This indicates a statistically significant relationship between the two variables studied. Referring to the interpretation by (Cohen et al., 2018), a correlation value in the range of 0.30 to 0.49 is categorized as a moderate relationship. Therefore, this finding reflects that there is a moderately positive relationship between the student needs management practices implemented by headmasters and the holistic development of students. In the context of this study, the higher the level of student needs management practices carried out by the headmasters, the higher the level of holistic development among Orang Asli students in terms of academic achievement, co-curricular involvement, and personal character.

Table 3 The Relationship between Student Needs Management Practices and the Holistic Development of Orang Asli Students

	Student Needs Management Practices	Holistic Student Development
Student Needs Management Practices	Pearson Correlation	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	Sig. (2-tailed)	
N	N	342
Holistic Student Development	Pearson Correlation	.411**
Sig. (2-tailed)	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
N	N	342

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

DISCUSSION

This The findings of this study demonstrate that the management of students' needs based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is implemented at a consistently high level in national schools serving Orang Asli communities. This indicates that headmasters in these schools have placed considerable emphasis on addressing both basic and higher-order student needs as part of their leadership and management practices. Such findings suggest a growing awareness among school leaders that students' readiness to learn is closely linked to the extent to which their fundamental physiological, safety, social, and psychological needs are fulfilled.

Notably, the management of esteem needs recorded the highest mean score among all constructs. This finding highlights the importance of practices that promote students' self-worth, confidence, and sense of achievement, particularly for Indigenous learners who may experience marginalisation within mainstream educational contexts. When students perceive that their efforts are recognised and their identities are respected, they are more likely to develop positive self-concepts and sustain engagement in learning activities. This supports the premise of Maslow's theory that esteem needs serve as a critical bridge between social belonging and self-actualisation.

The high mean score observed for the management of safety needs further underscores the significance of creating learning environments that are physically and emotionally secure. For Orang Asli students, safety extends beyond physical protection to include emotional security, freedom from discrimination, and the presence of supportive relationships with teachers and peers. A safe school climate fosters trust and reduces anxiety, enabling students to focus on learning rather than on coping with perceived threats. This finding reinforces existing literature that positions safety as a foundational condition for effective learning and student well-being (Sa, 2022) .

Similarly, the strong emphasis on self-actualisation needs reflects efforts by school leaders to provide opportunities for students to realise their potential through academic, co-curricular, and personal development activities. Although self-actualisation is traditionally viewed as the highest level within Maslow's hierarchy, its relatively high mean score in this study suggests that schools are not solely focused on addressing deficits but are also attentive to nurturing students' talents, interests, and aspirations. This is particularly significant in Indigenous education, where opportunities for self-expression and personal growth may be constrained by structural and socioeconomic factors (Woodroffe, 2020).

In contrast, while the management of basic needs recorded the lowest mean score among the constructs, it nonetheless remained within the high category. This finding reflects the persistent challenges associated with meeting physiological needs such as nutrition, transportation, and access to basic facilities in Orang Asli settlements. Although schools may implement various support mechanisms, limitations beyond the immediate control of school leaders such as geographical isolation and household poverty may affect the consistency with which these needs are met. The relatively lower mean score therefore highlights the ongoing need for inter-agency collaboration and policy-level support to complement school-based efforts.

The significant positive relationship identified between the management of students' needs and holistic student development further substantiates the central premise of this study. Effective

management of students' hierarchical needs was found to be associated with higher levels of holistic development, encompassing academic achievement, co-curricular participation, and character formation. This finding empirically supports Maslow's theoretical proposition that the fulfilment of lower- and higher-order needs facilitates optimal human development. Within the Orang Asli context, it suggests that needs-based leadership practices play a crucial role in shaping students' overall educational experiences and outcomes.

Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of adopting a student-centred and needs-based approach to school leadership, particularly in Indigenous educational settings. Headmasters who integrate Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs into their management practices are better positioned to create supportive, inclusive, and development-oriented school environments. Such environments not only enhance students' immediate engagement with schooling but also contribute to longer-term outcomes related to personal growth, resilience, and social mobility among Orang Asli students.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to examine the relationship between the practices of student needs management by headteachers and the level of student development or student outcomes among Orang Asli students in national primary schools. Based on the findings from 342 teachers representing Orang Asli settlement schools across Peninsular Malaysia, the study found that the practice of student needs management by headteachers was at a high level, while the level of student development among Orang Asli students was at a moderately high level. Pearson correlation analysis confirmed a significant and positive relationship between the two variables. This indicates that the higher the level of student needs management implemented by the headmasters, the higher the level of student development as reported by teachers.

This study indirectly validates Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory in the context of minority education communities such as the Orang Asli. The headteacher's ability to meet students' basic, emotional, and psychosocial needs is seen as fundamental to the holistic realization of students' potential. In terms of practical contribution, the study has important implications for the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), State Education Departments (JPN), District Education Offices (PPD), and headteachers in formulating school management policies and strategies. The study recommends that the dimension of student needs management be made a key component in school leadership training, especially for schools operating in Orang Asli and remote communities. Headteachers should receive regular training on cultural management, emotional support for students, and remedial learning approaches that are locally appropriate.

From the academic standpoint, this study fills a gap in the literature concerning the effects of school management within Orang Asli communities a topic that has received limited attention in local educational research. By providing empirical data on the relationship between student needs management practices and student development, this study strengthens the justification for more humanistic, student-centered, and inclusive management approaches among school leaders.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it only employed a questionnaire method and did not involve data triangulation through interviews or observations, which could have provided deeper insight into the context of headteachers'

practices. Second, the study involved only teachers as respondents and did not consider the perspectives of students, parents, or other school administrators. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for definitive causal inferences but only indicates relationships between variables. Furthermore, the findings of this study are limited to the context of Orang Asli national schools in Peninsular Malaysia and cannot be generalized to other types of schools or minority communities without considering local factors.

Therefore, the researcher recommends that future studies adopt a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data, and involve various stakeholders within the school ecosystem. Longitudinal studies are also suggested to examine the long-term effects of student needs management on student development. Additionally, intervention research that evaluates the effectiveness of specific programs or management practices implemented by headteachers could open new avenues to strengthen leadership strategies in the education of marginalized communities in Malaysia.

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