



e-ISSN: 2600-7568



Available online at
<https://journal.uitm.edu.my/ojs/index.php/>

**GADING Journal for
the Social Sciences**

GADING Journal for the Social Sciences 29(2) 2026, 236 – 244

Understanding the Social Behaviour of Orang Asli Students in Malaysian Multicultural Schools: Perspectives of Teachers and School Administrators

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 April 2026
Revised 10 July 2026
Accepted 15 August 2026
Online first 09 September 2026
Published 31 October 2026

Keywords:

social behaviour
Orang Asli
indigenous students
multicultural education

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.24191/gading.v29i2.888>

ABSTRACT

This study explores the social behaviour of Orang Asli (OA) students within ethnically mixed school environments in Malaysia, focusing on their classroom participation, peer interactions, and leadership tendencies. A total of 94 responses were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to educators working in schools with OA student populations. The items measured perceptions of OA students' behaviour using a 5-point Likert scale across four main domains: shyness and reserved nature, classroom participation, peer relationships, and leadership. Findings indicate that OA students tend to exhibit moderate levels of shyness, particularly in formal classroom settings. They are often hesitant to speak in front of others or participate in discussions without encouragement. However, their engagement improves in familiar group settings and when teachers create a supportive and inclusive environment. Notably, OA students are more socially active during informal or non-academic school activities, where they appear more confident and expressive, especially when accepted by peers. Leadership traits were also observed to be developing. While many OA students initially avoid taking leadership roles, they demonstrate potential when provided with support and encouragement. These findings reflect the importance of fostering culturally responsive and inclusive school practices to support the social and emotional development of indigenous students. This study contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous education by highlighting the social dynamics of OA students in Malaysia's multicultural schooling context, offering insights into improving equity, engagement, and integration for marginalised learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Orang Asli, Malaysia's Indigenous peoples, represent a culturally rich but often marginalised community comprising around 0.7% of the national population (IWGIA, 2017). Despite various efforts by the government to improve their educational access and participation, OA students continue to face challenges in mainstream schooling environments. These challenges are not solely academic in nature; they

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are also social and behavioural, often rooted in cultural differences, limited early exposure to formal education, and feelings of exclusion. While past research has extensively examined the academic performance and educational inequality faced by OA students, less attention has been paid to their social behaviour and interactions within the school environment (Masni et al., 2022). Understanding how OA students behave socially in schools is essential to promoting a more inclusive, supportive, and culturally responsive education system.

One of the key issues affecting OA students is their limited social integration in schools (Perso, 2020). It is also often reported that the OA students tend to be shy, reserved, and hesitant to participate in classroom discussions or group activities (Behera, 2015). Peer relationships can also be strained, particularly when OA students feel isolated due to cultural or language differences. In addition, many are reluctant to take on leadership roles, even when given the opportunity (Othman, 2022). Such patterns of behaviour may negatively impact their confidence, academic engagement, and long-term educational success. However, without sufficient data and observation, it is difficult for educators and policymakers to develop interventions that truly address these behavioural dynamics in a meaningful way.

Therefore, this study aims to better understand the social behaviour of OA students in school settings by examining their interactions, participation, and social roles. Specifically, the study explores key behavioural domains, including shyness and reserved nature, classroom and group participation, peer relationships and bonding, and leadership tendencies. In doing so, it seeks to answer how OA students demonstrate these social behaviours within the school environment and to identify the patterns that characterise their social interactions. Accordingly, the research objective is to determine the social behaviour of OA students in schools, providing a foundation for developing culturally sensitive strategies to enhance their social well-being and educational experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Behaviour of Orang Asli Students in Schools

Understanding the social behaviour of OA students in Malaysian schools requires attention to their cultural background, learning environment, and interpersonal relationships. Numerous studies have indicated that OA students exhibit distinct social patterns that often differ from the mainstream school population due to cultural norms, language barriers, and limited exposure to formal education (Othman, 2022; Masni et al, 2022). This study focuses on four primary domains of social behaviour: shyness and reserved nature, classroom and group participation, peer relationship and bonding, and leadership as shown in Figure 1. Each domain reflects how OA students interact within the school setting and responds to educational and social challenges.

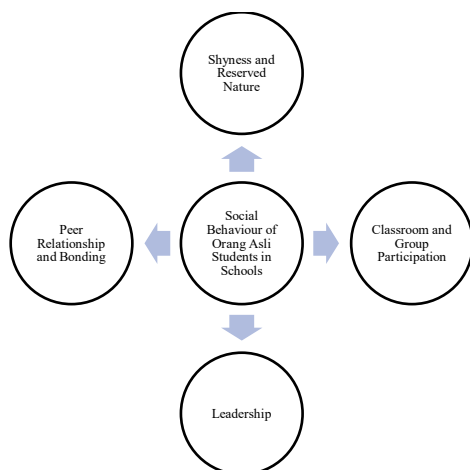


Fig. 1. The Theoretical Framework of Social Behaviour of Orang Asli Students in Schools

2.1.1 Shyness and Reserved Nature

OA students often appear shy and withdrawn in classroom settings. This behaviour is rooted in cultural values that emphasise modesty, humility, and non-confrontation. Renganathan (2011) found that many teachers misinterpret the quietness of OA students as disinterest, when in fact it may stem from discomfort in unfamiliar environments. Subpoints within this domain include the students' reluctance to speak in front of others, their tendency to remain silent during discussions, and visible hesitation when interacting with peers or teachers. Nor Shaïd et al. (2021) further noted that OA students often experience anxiety when using Malay, the language of instruction, which contributes to their reserved behaviour. This shyness is not necessarily a sign of lack of ability but reflects a need for greater cultural understanding within the school system.

2.1.2 Classroom and Group Participation

Participation in academic and group activities among OA students tends to be low, particularly when they are placed in unfamiliar or competitive settings. Subpoints include the students' reluctance to initiate classroom conversations, their tendency to follow rather than lead in group activities, and their increased engagement when paired with familiar classmates. Studies have shown that OA students require repeated encouragement from teachers before they feel comfortable contributing (Othman, 2022). Importantly, participation improves significantly in supportive environments where teachers use inclusive teaching practices, such as cooperative learning and culturally responsive pedagogy. Othman et al. (2024) emphasised that culturally safe classrooms allow OA students to build confidence and participate more actively, especially when group tasks align with their community-based learning styles. These findings suggest that classroom participation is highly context-dependent and can be strengthened through thoughtful instructional design.

2.1.3 Peer Relationship and Bonding

Social interactions among peers play a significant role in shaping OA students' school experiences. Peer relationship and bonding encompass several subpoints: the preference for forming friendships within their own ethnic group, hesitation in interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds, increased social activity during informal or non-academic settings, and improved expressiveness when accepted by peers. Ma'rof and Hamsan (2020) found that a strong sense of ethnic identity and attachment provides emotional safety, which influences whom the students choose to socialise with. When peer relationships are positive and inclusive, OA students tend to become more expressive and engaged in school life. Conversely, when they feel excluded or stereotyped, they may withdraw further. These patterns highlight the importance of promoting cross-cultural understanding and peer mentoring programs in schools to support social integration and emotional development.

2.1.4 Leadership

Leadership among OA students is one of the least commonly observed behaviours, largely due to their cultural orientation and lack of exposure to leadership roles. Students often avoid taking the lead in group assignments and show discomfort or uncertainty when placed in charge (Othman, 2022). Subpoints include reluctance to volunteer as group leaders, fear of making mistakes in front of others, and passive behaviour in decision-making situations. Despite this, research shows that with appropriate support and encouragement, some OA students demonstrate potential to take on leadership roles (Ma'rof & Hamsan, 2020). Their willingness to lead increases when tasks are presented in a collaborative, non-hierarchical format that aligns with communal values. Leadership development programs tailored to OA students' strengths such as teamwork, cooperation, and respect for elders can help unlock hidden capabilities and build confidence.

In summary, OA students display unique social behaviours shaped by their cultural background and the school environment. They tend to be shy and reserved, participate less in class, form closer bonds with

peers from similar backgrounds, and show limited leadership unless guided appropriately. However, these behaviours can still be fixed to achieve a better learning experience. Recognising and responding to these domains not only improves social integration but also enhances the overall educational experience for OA students.

3. METHODOLOGY

The survey instrument was developed specifically for this study to examine the social behaviour of OA students in school across four domains: shyness and reserved nature, classroom and group participation, peer relationships and bonding, and leadership. The items in the questionnaire were developed based on an extensive review of the literature based on the four-mentioned domains. Each section consisted of statements describing observable social behaviours of OA students as perceived by school teachers and administrators.

The shyness and reserved nature domain assessed whether students appeared shy, avoided speaking in class, or preferred to stay silent during discussions. Classroom and group participation items explored their willingness to engage in lessons, initiate conversations, and respond to teacher encouragement, including whether familiarity with peers improved participation. The peer relationship and bonding section examined students' comfort in forming friendships, especially with those from different cultural backgrounds, and their openness when socially accepted. The leadership domain measured their confidence and readiness to take on leadership roles, as well as their potential when given support. All the fifteen (15) items under the four (4) domains were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), enabling a clear understanding of the extent to which each behaviour was observed among OA students.

To establish content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by seven school teachers who have experience in teaching and dealing with OA students with more than 10 years' experience to ensure that the items were relevant, clear, and representative of the intended constructs. Their feedback was incorporated to improve the wording and content of the instrument before data collection. A pilot study was subsequently conducted to assess the reliability of the instrument, and internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficients as shown in Table 1 indicated that the instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency for measuring the four domains of social behaviour.

Table 1. Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
0.679	15

The targeted respondents were teachers, school administrators, and counsellors from primary and secondary with OA student populations. A total of 94 respondents participated in the study. Frequency analysis was used to analyse the background information of respondents, while mean score analysis was applied to evaluate patterns of social behaviour based on each domain. The survey approach enabled the researchers to collect structured, perception-based data from individuals who directly interact with OA students, offering insights into the social challenges and strengths they exhibit in school.

4. FINDING & DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Background.

As shown in Table 2 the majority of respondents were teachers, comprising 85% (n=80), followed by administrators at 3% (n=3) and counsellors made up 12% (n=12). This shows that most feedback comes from those directly involved in classroom interactions. Administrators and counsellors also provide important insights into school climate and student support.

Table 2. The Position of Respondents

Position	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Teacher	80	85%
Administrator	3	3%
Counsellor	11	12%
Other	0	0%
Total	94	100%

Most respondents have between 4 to 6 years of teaching experience, making up the largest group at 35 individuals as shown in Table 3. This is followed by those with 1 to 3 years of experience (n=24), indicating a fairly experienced respondent group overall. Only 9 respondents have less than 1 year of experience, while 26 have over 6 years. The data suggests that a majority of the participants have sufficient exposure to observe and assess students' social behaviour meaningfully.

Table 3. Respondents Year of Experience in Teaching

Teaching Experience	Frequency
<1 year	9
1–3 years	24
4–6 years	35
>6 years	26

Meanwhile, 51 respondents were from primary schools, while 43 were from secondary schools, as presented in Table 4. This distribution indicates that the study gathered perspectives from teachers across both educational levels, providing a broader understanding of the social behaviour of Orang Asli students.

Table 4. Types of School

School Type	Frequency
Primary	51
Secondary	43
Total	94

Most respondents reported having 31–50 OA students in their schools (n = 53), suggesting a moderate level of OA representation within the student population (Table 5). This indicates that the majority of participating schools have sufficient exposure to OA students, enabling teachers to observe their social behaviours and interactions in the school environment. Consequently, the respondents are likely to provide informed perspectives that contribute to a more reliable understanding of the social behaviour of OA students.

Table 5. No of OA Students in the School

Number of OA Students	Frequency
<10	0
10–30	17
31–50	53
>50	24

4.2 The social Behaviour of Orang Asli Students in School

As portrayed in Table 6, the results with mean score range between 3.43 to 3.95 suggest that OA students generally demonstrate moderate levels of social interaction, classroom participation, and leadership potential, influenced significantly by context and support systems.

Table 6. The Social Behaviour of Orang Asli in School Settings

Social Behaviour of OA Students in School	Mean Value
Shyness and Reserved Nature	
OA students appear shy when interacting with peers in class.	3.65
OA students are reluctant to speak in front of others, even when prompted.	3.85
OA students prefer to stay silent during classroom discussions.	3.74
Classroom and Group Participation	
OA students rarely initiate conversation in classroom settings.	3.68
OA students tend to follow rather than lead in group activities.	3.43
When OA students are paired with peers they know, they participate more actively.	3.55
OA students require repeated encouragement to engage in classroom discussions.	3.49
OA students' level of participation improves when the teacher creates a supportive environment.	3.88
Peer Relationship and Bonding	
OA students are more comfortable forming friendships within their own ethnic group.	3.67
OA students show hesitation in building friendships with students from other cultural backgrounds.	3.74
OA students are more socially active during non-academic or informal school activities.	3.68
When accepted by peers, OA students become more open and expressive.	3.85
Leadership	
OA students often avoid taking leadership roles in group assignments.	3.95
OA students express uncertainty or discomfort when assigned to lead a group.	3.75
With sufficient support, some OA students show potential to lead.	3.88

In terms of shyness and reserved nature, the mean scores ranged from 3.65 to 3.85, indicating that OA students tend to be somewhat hesitant in verbal interactions, particularly in formal settings like classroom discussions. This aligns with past studies indicating that OA students often experience sociocultural barriers in mainstream education environments, which may limit their willingness to participate openly (Panchadcharam & Saludin, 2025). The preference for silence and reluctance to speak in front of others could be linked to linguistic differences, self-esteem issues, or a lack of representation in classroom content.

When examining classroom and group participation, mean scores (3.43–3.88) reveal that OA students are more comfortable participating when grouped with familiar classmates and in supportive environments. This finding supports Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasises the importance of social context and scaffolding in student engagement. Repeated encouragement and a nurturing classroom climate appear to significantly impact their willingness to contribute, suggesting that culturally responsive teaching practices can be effective in supporting OA students (Dong, 2022).

Interestingly, the results on peer relationships and bonding show that OA students are more active in informal school settings (mean = 3.68) and become more expressive once accepted by their peers (mean = 3.85). This indicates that the less structured and lower-pressure nature of non-academic activities may offer a more inclusive environment for social interaction. Studies by Freire et al. (2024) similarly note that informal peer networks play a critical role in shaping OA students' sense of belonging and identity within the school system.

The dimension of leadership presented slightly higher mean values (3.75–3.95), reflecting a positive developmental potential. While OA students often avoid taking leadership roles initially, they demonstrate the capacity to lead when provided with appropriate support. This finding suggests that OA students are not inherently disinterested in leadership but may lack the confidence or exposure to leadership experiences in earlier schooling. According to Ma'rof & Hamsan (2020), building leadership skills in indigenous students requires intentional mentorship and representation, which fosters both competence and self-efficacy.

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the social behaviours of OA students in ethnically mixed school settings, with findings indicating moderate levels of social interaction, classroom participation, and leadership potential. The results, with mean scores ranging between 3.43 and 3.95, suggest that OA students generally demonstrate moderate but context-dependent social engagement, which is significantly influenced by teacher encouragement, peer acceptance, and supportive school environments. While they may exhibit shyness and hesitation in formal classroom situations, their participation and leadership potential improve when appropriate social and emotional support is provided. Informal settings further enhance their comfort in social interaction, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive and inclusive educational practices. Therefore, educators and policymakers should recognise these contextual influences and implement targeted strategies that foster engagement, confidence, and a sense of belonging among OA students. Such efforts are essential to promoting equity and meaningful inclusion within Malaysia's mainstream education system. Future research is recommended to include OA students as the primary respondents to gain first-hand insights into their social behaviours, experiences, and challenges within the school environment. Collecting data directly from OA students would complement teachers' perspectives and provide a more comprehensive understanding of their social interactions and educational experiences. Such an approach would also strengthen the development of culturally responsive strategies and interventions that better address the needs of OA students.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS/FUNDING

This research was funded by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia under the MYRA-PHD 2023/2 grant scheme.

7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Wan Norizan Wan Ismail and **Hazliza Haron**: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing-original draft; **Wan Faida Wan Azmi**: Conceptualisation, methodology, and formal analysis; **Siti Sarah Mat Isa**: Conceptualisation, formal analysis, and validation; **Nor Hafizah Yusop**, **Zaimah Zainal Abidin**: Conceptualisation, supervision, writing- review and editing, and validation.

10. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

This manuscript was developed with the assistance of ChatGPT, Grammarly and Quilbolt for the purpose of drafting, assistance, paraphrasing and grammar checking. The tool/service supported the author(s) in drafting, assistance, paraphrasing and grammar checking, and the authors assume full responsibility for the final version submitted for publication.

11. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

12. ETHICS STATEMENT

This study did not undergo research ethics review.

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