EMPOWERING UNDERPRIVILEGED STUDENTS: A COLLABORATIVE EDUCATION ENRICHMENT INITIATIVE BY UiTM AND PKAYIS

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Abstract*: Pertubuhan Kebajikan Anak-Anak Yatim Islam Daerah Segamat (PKAYIS) was established as an effort to address the needs of orphans in the Segamat District, Johor, Malaysia. Among others, this welfare organization aims to provide shelter and support for academic learning for these orphans who are also usually underprivileged students. However, PKAYIS faces the challenge of high tuition fees hindering the orphaned children under their care from attending paid supplementary classes or external tuitions. Recognizing the importance of academic support, UiTM Johor has joined forces with PKAYIS to resolve the matter. UiTM academicians contribute their expertise in English, Mathematics, and Science subjects, serving as tutors and coordinators for supplementary classes or tutoring programs. The tutors consist of lecturers from the Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Academy of Language Studies, and Faculty of Accountancy. Meanwhile, the coordinators also come from various colleges and faculties within UiTM Johor, and they diligently follow the set schedule and provide necessary class resources, including contributing food and beverages for attending students. This collaboration between UiTM Johor and PKAYIS extends beyond community service; it serves as a UiTM consultancy project with significant impact on the local community, particularly in the education sector. UiTM fully supports the Malaysian Ministry of Education's efforts to make the education system more inclusive. This initiative aligns with UiTM's commitment to maintain a high-quality education system, nurture individual potential, and contribute to national aspirations.*

Introduction

Education is an essential aspect for orphans and underprivileged students. It can open opportunities for a better future for those students. Education provides them with knowledge and all the necessities to get a good job in the future, ensuring that they can get out of poverty and build a better life (Veeriah & Nasri, 2019). Education is not about academics only, as it also includes soft-skill training in students such as critical thinking, problem solving, and communication. Besides, it helps improve self-esteem and resilience among those children and provides protection from any exploitation and bad elements. By ensuring the orphans and underprivileged students get enough education, we are not only providing them with better opportunities but also helping to create a good community as these orphans and underprivileged students need better educational support systems (Ahmad & Jamil, 2021).

Community collaboration in education can enhance learning opportunities for students by providing access to resources, experiences, and expertise that may not be available in traditional school settings (Sarah et al., 2023). Research indicates that collaboration between academicians and communities in education can enhance students' academic performance, attendance, and graduation rates (Ellis, 2019; Kraft & Goldstein, 2021). The involvement of academicians in tutoring programs is crucial, as it can provide guidance, encouragement, and real-life perspectives that inspire students to pursue higher education and career paths that they might not have otherwise considered (Kraft & Falken, 2021). This holistic approach not only addresses the immediate educational needs of underprivileged students but also promotes long-term social and economic mobility.

Rasidi and Mahmud (2023) found that environmental influences are one of the factors affecting the academic performance of orphaned students. Therefore, supplementary classes or tutoring programs give extra help outside the school hours to ensure those orphans who are also underprivileged students get support to do well in academics. With the extra support, the students can strengthen their understanding, especially of the basic concepts which in turn will improve their academic grades at school. Additionally, the concept of this supplementary class is learning in a small group and learning that occurs due to interaction between peers who are involved in completing tasks together (Basari, 2023). In this case, the tutor acts as a guide and helps provide further explanation for any unclear concepts.

Background and Context

Pertubuhan Kebajikan Anak-anak Yatim Daerah Segamat (PKAYIS) was established to provide accommodation facilities and support the educational needs of orphans who are also underprivileged students in the Segamat district, Johor. Many of these students face significant challenges, with the main issue being financial constraints to get better education resources. In the awareness that supplementary classes or tutoring programs can help improve student performance, PKAYIS faces the challenge of high costs that prevent the orphans from attending tuition classes. Understanding the importance of academic support, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Johor has collaborated with PKAYIS to increase educational opportunities for these students.

Accordingly, initiated by Associate Professor Dr. Saunah Zainon, an Accounting senior lecturer who was a chairperson of Academic Unit, PKAYIS, a supplementary class program was launched to support the goals of the learning requirements. The move to bring in teaching staff from UiTM Johor is the main initiative in dealing with this issue. The tutors of the PKAYIS supplementary class program consist of lecturers from the School of Computing Science and Mathematics (PSPM), Language Studies Academy (APB), and Faculty of Accounting. Meanwhhile, the class coordinators consist of lecturers from all colleges and faculties at UiTM Johor, who are on duty according to the set schedule and help in preparing class needs, including providing food and drinks to students who attend the supplementary classes.

Originally, the focus of this program was for Form 3 and Form 5 students only, with a focus on Mathematics and English subjects. However, starting in 2020, UiTM Johor Branch contributed the expertise of teaching staff in the subjects of English, Mathematics, and Science for all primary and secondary school students residing in the orphanage. UiTM lecturers also play the role of coordinators for the classes. Starting in 2023, the supplementary classes or tutoring programs are held every Monday and Tuesday from 9:00 pm to 10:30 pm for Standard 4, 5, and 6 students, as well as Form 1 to Form 3 students involving a total of 12 tutors and 30 coordinators.

Hence, this initiative aims to achieve the following objectives:

(i) *To ensure orphans have access to quality education including resources and experts*. This is based on the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 which stipulates that access to quality education is a fundamental right and that every individual deserves an opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their socio-economic background. This initiative also helps to reduce the costs financed by PKAYIS.

(ii) *To improve the emotional and psychosocial well-being of orphans*. This comprehensive initiative not only focuses on academics but also provides motivation support to ensure that they can share their emotions with the tutors or coordinators. Psychosocial well-being is a crucial aspect that needs to be catered for especially among orphans.

(iii) *To build an inclusive and supportive community* especially among UiTM academicians, where they have a critical role to play in giving back to the community, and that community engagement is an essential component of academic excellence.

Methodology
The objective of education enrichment initiatives is to enhance students' learning experiences and academic outcomes. These initiatives often focus on tutoring, coordination and provision of resources. It can involve various parties such as schools, university, community organizations, parents, and volunteers (Robinson et al., 2022).

Baye et al. (2019) stated that small-group or individualized tutoring can bring significant improvements in student achievement across various subjects, including mathematics, science and reading. Nickow et al. (2020) showed tutoring programs that provide individualized or regular sessions can significantly increase student performance in both reading and mathematics. According to Robinson et al. (2021), high-dosage tutoring intensive, personalized tutoring, and frequent sessions are impactful interventions to support students who have fallen

behind. Thus, tutoring is most effective when it is fitted to the specific needs of students and delivered consistently over time.

Coordination can be considered as the management of volunteer efforts, the allocation of funding, and the alignment of program goals with educational standards and objectives. A well-coordinated system for ensuring the educational interventions are delivered effectively and that resources are used efficiently is of paramount importance (Lake, 2021). Ogrin et al. (2022) found that the systems that match tutors with students based on specific criteria, such as academic needs and availability, have become increasingly common.

Resource provision is a cornerstone of successful educational enrichment initiatives, particularly in ensuring that all students have the support they need to succeed and to access the necessary educational tools. There should be a strong emphasis on approaching students in low-income and marginalized communities (McMorris & Knight, 2022).

The collaboration initiative between UiTM and PKAYIS is structured as follows:
  (i)   *Tutoring*: UiTM academicians from various faculties, including the Centre for Computer Science and Mathematics Studies (PSPM, KPPIM), the Academy of Language Studies, and the Faculty of Accountancy, provide tutoring in core subjects which are Mathematics, Science, and English.
  (ii) *Coordination*: UiTM coordinators ensure the smooth operation of the supplementary classes, adhering to the set schedule and managing resources.
  (iii) *Resource Provision*: In addition to academic support, UiTM contributes food and beverages for attending students, ensuring they are well-nourished and ready to learn.

Effective tutoring programs supported by good coordination and equitable resource provision are essential for increasing student academic results and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed. The design of this study is a qualitative study in the form of unstructured interviews, the best option for first-hand data generation in educational and social science research practices (Bihu, 2020). The participants selected were randomized; a total of 7 respondents consisting of 4 students and 3 tutors. All the participants selected granted their consent to participate in the study.

Implementation
Educational enrichment initiatives are mostly designed to provide additional support to the students. These initiatives are often structured around key components such as needs assessment, recruitment of tutors, schedule development, and resource allocation. All the elements are very important to the successful implementation of programs that seek to bridge gaps in education and provide targeted interventions for students.

Effective needs assessment not only identifies academic needs but also considers social, environmental, and emotional factors that may impact student learning. Needs assessment acts as a critical starting point for educational initiatives to identify students' academic and socio-emotional needs (Redding & Grissom, 2021). Another study focused on part of the needs assessment process which looks at the importance of addressing students' mental health and well-being. It recognized that these factors are crucial for effective learning (Weist et al., 2022).

Recruitment of tutors is also an important aspect for education enrichment initiatives. The success of tutoring programs mostly depends on the tutors' commitment and quality. It can target a variety of potential tutors such as university students, retired educators, community volunteers, and professional tutors. By providing incentives, either financial or recognition can enhance tutor retention and motivation (Prowse et al., 2021). Research also highlighted the importance of development and training for tutors. This is to make sure that the tutors are equipped with the skills necessary to deliver effective instruction (Nores et al., 2023).

Schedule development is another crucial component of education enrichment initiatives. Scheduling must consider the availability of students, tutors, and resources. Research has shown the importance of flexibility in scheduling, allowing programs to accommodate the varying needs of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Barshay, 2021). Besides, flexible scheduling includes options for evening and weekend sessions that can significantly improve participation and engagement in tutoring programs (Hart et al., 2021).

Resource allocation involves the distribution of human, financial and material resources to support the objectives of the program. Knight (2017) found that equitable resource allocation is essential for addressing educational disparities. Gwynne et al. (2022) focused on the importance of ensuring that resources are distributed equitably, with a target on reaching the most disadvantaged students.

The initiative was launched with a detailed plan involving several key steps:
  (i)   *Needs Assessment*: A thorough assessment of the educational needs of PKAYIS students was conducted to tailor the tutoring sessions.
  (ii)   *Recruitment of Tutors*: UiTM academicians volunteered to participate in the program, bringing expertise from their respective fields.
  (iii) *Schedule Development*: A schedule was developed to maximize the effectiveness of the tutoring sessions while accommodating the students' existing commitments.
  (iv)   *Resource Allocation*: Resources, including teaching materials and refreshments, were allocated to ensure a conducive learning environment.

Challenges and Solutions
Despite the numerous benefits of the supplementary classes or tutoring programs, the collaborative initiative faced several challenges. The first challenge is the *high tuition fees*. External tutoring was initially unaffordable for many orphans, prompting PKAYIS to seek internal solutions. This internal solution was to provide support for the children's education. Initially, they had considered hiring an external teacher for the additional class; however, the fees were quite high, and this has led to the development of the current initiative. One of the major challenges for orphans to pursue their studies is financial problems besides transportation, daydreaming, and distraction during study (Akbarim & Sahibzada, 2019). This shows that high tuition fees are one of the challenges for orphans in pursuing academic excellence.

Additionally, there are also *resource constraints* faced by PKAYIS. Limited financial allocation requiring innovative solutions to provide necessary academic materials and support. Materials and support here were in terms of education resources such as books for references and exercises, a complete and conducive library, computers and other IT equipment, and hardware to support educational activities for the students. Children with available Internet technologies

with high-speed user interface connectivity will be more disposed to the use of the internet for self-development (Omar et al., 2014). Thus, the initiative is aimed to reduce the gap of the underprivileged children to internet technologies and connectivity for their academic and self-development.

The orphan engagement and attendance for the supplementary classes imposed another challenge. Maintaining high levels of student engagement and attendance was crucial to the success of the program. This is because if the students do not attend the classes, their exam result may not improve. During the classes as well, student engagement is crucial as it may influence success of the initiative and according to Akbarim and Sahibzada (2019), daydreaming has been identified as one of the challenges. Developing effective teacher-student relationships and facilitating positive student-student relationships are among the factors that improve their engagement in academic activities and optimizing perceptions of workloads (Xerri et al., 2017).

After analyzing all the challenges mentioned above, the following solutions were implemented:

(i) *Subsidized Tutoring*: By leveraging UiTM's academic resources, the cost of tutoring was significantly reduced. UiTM has provided teaching resources for the classes done in PKAYIS with lower cost. As the UiTM's lecturers are involved in these activities, financial gains are not the main focus for them but giving back to the community are. UiTM's lecturers from various faculties involved both as teachers and the coordinators for the supplementary classes or tutoring programs.

(ii) *Community Support*: All academicians involved were encouraged to contribute resources and support. The resources supported by them include teaching and learning materials such as books, exercise sheets, and stationery. Besides, the coordinators will help to provide support in facilitating the classes and providing meals and drinks for the children to enjoy after each class with the intention to boost the children's motivation level and engagement with the tutors.

(iii) *Motivational Support*: Motivational elements were introduced to maintain student interest and attendance during classes. In each class, the tutor is encouraged to share stories and experience as an encouragement for the children to focus on their studies and proceed to the next educational levels. Inspiring stories on successful individuals and personal experience may inspire the children to aim for success in their life. According to Maruf et al. (2022), there are internal factors (personal interest, positive attitude towards English, motivation for a better future) and external factors (good grade for exam, social encouragement, and traveling and studying abroad) that were positively related to motivation and demotivation in learning English among Indonesian orphaned students. Thus, this shows the importance of providing motivational support for the orphans in PKAYIS by providing encouragement by the tutors, as well as trying to encourage them to focus in classes to get better grades.

Impact and Outcomes

One of the positive impacts of tutoring is increased academic improvement. It has been found that small-group or individualized tutoring contributes to significant improvements in student achievement in mathematics, science, and reading (Baye et al., 2019), and that individualized and regular tutoring sessions boost student performance in both reading and mathematics (Nickow et al., 2020). In addition, Vick et al. (2015) discovered that tutored students scored

statistically significantly better final grades in developmental English courses than non-tutored students where the tutored students scored higher percentages of As and Bs.

Moreover, research has established that tutoring could increase self-confidence and motivation among the students. In their research on peer tutoring in English language learning among young learners, Parker et al. (2023) found that both tutors and tutees experienced increased self-confidence and motivation, and enhanced communication and interpersonal skills. Vick et al. (2015), on the other hand, observed that continuous tutoring results in lower rates of withdrawal among the English learners taking developmental English courses. They suggested that these students were more determined to complete their coursework and be more successful in future courses.

In relation to the collaborative initiative between UiTM and PKAYIS, the impacts have been profound on the local community especially for the orphans at PKAYIS. To illustrate the impact and outcomes of the initiative, some achievement and feedback from the orphans and UiTM tutors are discussed below.

Academic Improvement

Students have shown significant improvements in their academic performance, particularly in English, Mathematics, and Science. Two students (S1 & S2) have shown improvement in all the three subjects. S1 is a 12 years old male and other than showing improvements in all the three subjects, he also scored the highest mark for mathematics in his class in the last examination. On the other hand, S2 (15-year-old male) has now joined a better class due to his improvement in the three subjects. For S3, another significant outcome of the tutoring sessions was that he started to pass the science subject which he usually failed in the past. Two other students (S3 & S4) have shown improvement in English. S3 is a 12-year-old female, while S4 is a 15-year-old male.

Both S1 and S3 agreed that the tutors conducted the sessions very well (*"sangat baik"*) and that the exercises/questions given during the tutoring sessions were interesting and helpful in assisting their comprehension ("*latihan/soalan yang diberikan sepanjang tuisyen juga menarik dan meningkatkan pemahaman*"). Besides, both S2 and S4 corroborated that the tutors were approachable and highly committed ("*Cikgu tuisyen yang mudah untuk didekati dan memberikan komitmen yang tinggi dalam mengajar*"). Meanwhile, S4 also reported that the tutors were really helpful in ensuring his comprehension through more interesting techniques or methods ("*Cikgu tuisyen sangat membantu dalam pemahaman melalui tunjuk ajar yang lebih menarik perhatian*").

Increased Confidence and Motivation

In their feedback, a few tutors mentioned about the students' increased self-confidence and motivation to excel academically. Tutor 3 (T3) stated that "*a few students showed increased self-confidence even though their English usage is far from perfect*". Tutors 1 and 3 (T1 & T3) both mentioned about the students' motivation: T1 remarked that "*the student is excited to attend each class and looks forward to the teacher's presence. They enjoy the tuition classes because the teaching methods are different from those used by school teachers*", and T3 noted that "*some students participated actively in the tasks given, even the weak ones. One underachiever was very motivated in that he asked lots of questions and volunteered to take part in the given tasks*". Tutor 2 (T2) felt grateful for being able to teach and motivate the orphans.

UiTM-Community Engagement

The initiative has fostered a sense of community and shared responsibility among UiTM academicians, faculty, and PKAYIS. This can be verified through the feedback from T2 who reported that "*I feel fortunate to be able to teach the orphans at PKAYIS. Besides teaching, I can also provide motivation to these children, as they are far from their families*". Additionally, T3 revealed that "*I stay quite near PKAYIS and thus felt responsible to contribute my energy and expertise to help the orphans. They need lots of help from those around them as the number of PKAYIS staff is quite small*".

Conclusion and Recommendations

The collaborative education enrichment initiative between UiTM and PKAYIS demonstrates the commitment of both organizations to address the educational needs of underprivileged orphaned students, to improve efforts towards producing a society that values quality education, and to carry out social responsibility. By providing academic support such as resources and experts to orphans who are also underprivileged students, this initiative empowers them to overcome socio-economic barriers that hinder their academic and career progress. Through this collaborative effort, UiTM and PKAYIS intend to have a positive impact on the lives of these students and contribute to the improvement of society especially in Segamat district, Johor.

The findings of this initiative have broad implications for the development of future collaborative models between academicians-communities aimed at addressing the educational needs of targeted groups. This project contributes to the existing body of literature on collaborative education initiatives, highlighting the potential of inter-organizational collaboration determining positive impact for underprivileged students. This extensive paper highlights the efforts and achievements of the UiTM-PKAYIS collaboration, providing a framework for similar initiatives aimed at empowering underprivileged students through education as stated in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 where every Malaysian child deserves equal access to an education that will enable that child to achieve his or her potential.

To ensure the sustainability and scalability of the initiative, several recommendations can be made as the followings:

(i) *Expand the program*: The initiative to provide educational enrichment programs to the underprivileged may be expanded to other districts and regions with similar needs. This is supported by the success of the current initiative by UiTM and PKAYIS. Besides the geographical expansion mentioned earlier, additional programs such as self-development programs, psychosocial programs and others may be considered to be implemented in PKAYIS. These programs aim for the overall individual improvement for the orphans.

(ii) *Seek additional funding*: Explore opportunities for additional funding from the government and private sector to support and expand the program. Additional funding will provide more opportunities to improve the current supplementary classes or tutoring programs. Additional funding will also enable improvement in the facilities at PKAYIS like having more books and teaching materials, computers, and IT hardware and equipment. The private sector may use this opportunity as a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activity for their organization and this will lead to a good public image. Customers generally display very positive attitudes toward, greater intent to support, and intent to purchase from the company with CSR initiatives (Kim & Ferguson, 2019).

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(iii)   *Continuous monitoring and evaluation*: Currently, there is no clear monitoring of the initiatives done. As an improvement, the implementation of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework can be considered to continuously assess the effectiveness of the program and to make necessary adjustments for further improvement. Continuous improvement is important to ensure the effectiveness of the programs. Besides, more feedback from the participants is also valuable for future improvement.

(iv)   *Strengthen community partnerships*: Stronger partnerships with local businesses, community organizations, and other educational institutions needs to be fostered to enhance resource availability and support. This effort will not only maximize the impact of the initiatives done but it will also build a more resilient and engaged community in hope for strategic collaboration to provide meaningful educational opportunities for the orphans in PKAYIS.

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