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Educational Opportunities and Challenges for Children with Indonesian Roots in Sabah, Malaysia: Permeability in National Education Reaching the Borderlands

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This study aims to clarify the background, current status, and remaining issues for a national education system that reaches out to the border areas and also transcends national borders. Its case study is children who have ties to Indonesia in Sabah, Malaysia. This research included interview surveys of children associated with Indonesia at Indonesian schools such as Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu(SIKK) in Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah, and at CLCs (Community Learning Centers) scattered throughout Sabah. As a result, through the Indonesian schools provided by the Indonesian government in Malaysia, the current state and issues of the national education system (hereafter the "cross-border national education system") provided to children associated with Indonesia across borders is clarified. In addition, we explain the meaning of an Indonesian school for Indonesian children.

The reasons for focusing on children with connections to Indonesia in this study is because the author conducted a field survey in the area near the Indonesian border in Sabah. While the Malaysian national education system reaches even to its border areas, it contrasts with similar phenomena seen in the border areas between the United States and Mexico, and Thailand and Cambodia. There, children cross borders to go to school (cross-border children) and are considered a dynamic educational phenomena. In contrast, "The national education system that reaches the border region" in Sabah is a static phenomenon.

Research is therefore needed into the lack of cross-border commutation to and from Indonesia despite the increase in exchange of people and goods between Indonesia and Malaysia. To engage with this issue, we focused on children with connections to Indonesia, who have been left behind by the Malaysian government's national education system and school support programs.

Two preliminary surveys were conducted in Sabah. The first survey (March 2019) was conducted in the border area of Sabah, Malaysia, and North Kalimantan, Indonesia, and we visited two public schools on the Malaysian side. Participant observation and interviews with principals and teachers were conducted at a public elementary school in the border area, and interviews with the staff were conducted at the district education office. The second survey (September 2019) was conducted in

Sabah and its suburbs in Malaysia. We visited one SIKK school in Kota Kinabalu, the state capital, and five CLCs in the suburbs, and conducted participant observations and interviews with principals, teachers, and students. The first session was conducted with a group of research collaborators, and the second session was conducted only by the author. The author asked local counterparts to cooperate with the survey.

Based on a field survey in Sabah, East Malaysia, the current situation and problems related to children with ties to Indonesia are considered from the following three perspectives. First, from the case of children with connections to Indonesia in Sabah, Malaysia, the national education system that crosses the border from Indonesia, and the Malaysian national education system that reaches the border area quietly coexist.

Second, the national education system, which aims at “cultivating the people,” still faces various problems. If we take the concept of “access” advocated by UNESCO, it is difficult to say that fair educational opportunities are sufficiently open to children with roots in foreign countries.

Third, there are wide disparities in the quality of education across national education systems and across borders. At SIKK, the quality of education is relatively high in terms of school buildings, facilities and teachers. However, at CLC, a branch school of SIKK, although the access is secure, it is difficult to allocate teachers for all subjects, and the facilities and equipment are insufficient. There are many other issues as well.

Furthermore, from interviews about the children's future prospects, it became clear that the children are going to Indonesian school in order to return to Indonesia someday. In other words, while it can be said that the cross-border national education system provided by the Indonesian government has achieved the goal of “cultivating the nation,” for children who have ties to Indonesia, Indonesian schools serve as a channel for crossing the border and returning to Indonesia in the future. In addition, the function of Malaysian schools to nurture the nation complements the function of Indonesian schools to nurture the nation, thereby determining the permeability of the border region.