

NAVIGATING TRANSITIONS: THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ADAPTATION OF WEST PAPUAN STUDENTS IN THE ADEM PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT This study explores the lived experiences of West Papuan students transitioning to high schools in Central Java through the Afirmasi Pendidikan Menengah (ADEM) program. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected from 12 students through in-depth interviews conducted in December 2018. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key challenges and adaptations in academic, social, and cultural dimensions. Findings indicate that while students experience significant academic improvement, structured learning, and personal development, they also face notable challenges in cultural adaptation, financial constraints, and social integration. Intellectual growth and life skills development were evident, with students reporting increased academic discipline, independence, and social adaptability. Many participated in academic competitions and extracurricular activities, enhancing both their academic and non-academic achievements. Despite the structured educational system and financial aid provided, adaptation barriers such as language differences, food preferences, and homesickness persisted. Comparison with previous studies highlights similar struggles among Papuan students in other regions, reinforcing the need for additional support mechanisms, financial stability, and cultural mentoring to ease their transition. This study underscores the importance of fostering an inclusive educational environment that supports both academic success and socio-cultural integration for ADEM students, ensuring long-term positive outcomes in their educational journey.

Keywords: West Papuan; cultural adaptation; academic achievement; financial support

INTRODUCTION

The Afirmasi Pendidikan Menengah (ADEM) program plays a crucial role in Indonesia's efforts to provide equitable education opportunities for students from disadvantaged regions, particularly those in Papua. This initiative aims to bridge educational disparities by offering selected students access to quality high schools in more developed regions such as Central Java. By addressing educational inequality, ADEM contributes to the broader goal of national development and social inclusion, ensuring that all Indonesian students have the chance to achieve academic success regardless of their place of origin.

For West Papuan students, the ADEM program offers numerous benefits, including improved academic resources, better facilities, and exposure to diverse social and cultural environments. These opportunities help enhance their intellectual and personal growth, equipping them with essential life skills and broader perspectives. Additionally, access to better teaching and structured learning environments increases their chances of pursuing higher education and securing better career prospects, ultimately empowering them to contribute positively to their communities upon returning home.

The transition from middle school (SMP) to high school (SMA) is a critical period in a student's academic journey. This stage not only shapes their academic foundations but also influences their personal and social development. For West Papuan students, adapting to a new educational setting in Central Java presents unique challenges, including cultural adjustment, homesickness, and differences in academic expectations. Understanding this transition is essential to ensuring the effectiveness of ADEM and supporting students in their adaptation process.

Several studies have explored the implementation of ADEM and its impact on students' academic performance and social integration. Winatha et al. (2021) and Martono et al. (2020) highlight the program's effectiveness in regions such as Lampung, Central Java, and Yogyakarta, providing greater educational opportunities. Additionally, Rochadi et al. (2024) emphasize ADEM's contribution to reducing ethnic disparities in education, while Syakarofath (2019) examines its implementation in East Java. Cultural adaptation is another crucial aspect, as discussed by Pujiasih (2019) and Pramudiana & Setyorini (2019), who explore the challenges and social adjustments faced by Papuan students in new educational environments. Furthermore, research by Gustiani, Marom, & Nurcahyanto (2022) confirms ADEM's positive impact on the social and academic integration of Papuan and West Papuan students.

Prior research has primarily focused on policy evaluation, administrative effectiveness, and general outcomes of the program. However, there is a lack of studies that examine the personal experiences and perceptions of ADEM awardees, particularly from the perspective of the students themselves.

To address this gap, this study aims to explore how West Papuan students constructed meaning and understanding around the transition experience to a Central Java high school. By focusing on their perspectives, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into the strengths and challenges of ADEM, informing future policy improvements and ensuring that the program effectively meets the needs of its beneficiaries.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design to understand the lived experiences of West Papuan students transitioning to high schools in Central Java through the ADEM program. A phenomenological approach was chosen to capture the personal perspectives of students as they navigate educational, cultural, and social changes.

Participants

The study involved 12 West Papuan students enrolled in high schools across Central Java under the ADEM program. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of backgrounds and experiences. The students ranged in age from 16 to 19 years and were in grades 10 to 12. The data collection took place in December 2018.

Table 1: Informants' Demographic

No	Pseudoname	District	Gender
1	Devina	Nabire	Female
2	Selfi	Paniai	Female
3	Yohana	Nabire	Female
4	Lina	Paniai	Female
5	Amel	Paniai	Female
6	Rita	Dogiyai	Female
7	Neli	Paniai	Female
8	Herin	Intan jaya	Female
9	Angel	Riak sintar	Female
10	Jein	Maybrat	Female
11	Dedi	Tambrauw	Male
12	Yulius	Tambrauw	Male

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth narrative interviews, allowing students to share their experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding their transition. The interviews were conducted in person at their respective schools at times convenient for the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. To ensure accuracy and depth, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data. The transcribed interviews were systematically coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. Key themes related to academic adaptation, social integration, cultural challenges, and program satisfaction were identified and categorized. Member checking was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent from participants and maintaining confidentiality. Participants were assured of their anonymity, and their responses were used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS

The findings from this study highlight three major themes: improvement, achievement, and satisfaction with the program. Overall, the findings indicate that the ADEM program has had a substantial positive impact on the students, enhancing their academic success, personal development, and future aspirations. Despite minor challenges, students valued the opportunity to study in a structured and supportive environment.

Improvement

Students reported significant improvement in their intellectual growth, including better academic performance, structured learning, and broader perspectives due to diverse social interactions. Dedi

emphasized the benefits of the program, stating that his knowledge had increased and that there were many extracurricular activities at school. Additionally, Angel noted that studying in Java allowed her to develop a more structured learning habit. She felt happy because she had many new friends, learning was more disciplined, and studying at school was more effective. Moreover, students expressed that their academic discipline improved as they were exposed to a more rigorous learning environment.

Beyond academics, students also developed essential life skills. Many expressed that they had become more independent and better at managing their time and finances. Devina explained that, previously, her pocket money of 10-20 thousand rupiah was spent on snacks, but now she used it mostly for meals and saved some for emergencies. Similarly, Jein mentioned how her self-confidence and adaptability had improved. She had become more enthusiastic, braver, more confident, and independent. Furthermore, students like Selfi highlighted the importance of social adaptation, stating that she could socialize with people from different places when at school.

Achievement

Many students participated in academic competitions, demonstrating their commitment to education. Devina was involved in the Geography Olympiad and HIV/AIDS Ambassadorship, stating that in grade 10, she participated in the Geography Olympiad and, in September, joined the HIV/AIDS ambassador competition. Others, like Yulius, focused on science-related subjects, expressing a strong interest in physics, which he considered his best subject. Additionally, students like Rita excelled in subjects such as physics and music due to their passion for learning.

Non-academic achievements were also prevalent. Sports and extracurricular activities played a significant role in students' development. Angel shared her excitement about sports, mentioning that she planned to participate in a volleyball competition. Meanwhile, Herin won second place in a competitive walking race, participating in a speed walking competition at the Magelang level. Lina also showcased her abilities in basketball, having once participated in a basketball competition at the high school/middle school level and winning third place. Additionally, students like Amelia were actively involved in organizations such as OSIS (Student Council) and Pramuka (Scout Movement).

Satisfaction with the Program

The majority of students expressed a high level of satisfaction with the ADEM program. Many were grateful for the educational support and structured academic system. Amelia emphasized the availability of better facilities in Java, stating that students in Java were more advanced than those in Papua because the facilities were adequate. Yohana also appreciated the structured daily activities, stating that she felt no time was wasted, as her schedule was filled with extracurricular activities and events.

Students acknowledged the financial support provided by the program, which significantly eased their family's economic burden. Jein highlighted how the program reduced financial stress for her family, stating that the benefits were very good because her expenses were well covered, reducing the burden on her parents, who had many children. However, some students, like Herin, noted that transportation

costs at the beginning of the program were not covered. She mentioned that one shortcoming of the ADEM program was that she had to buy her own ticket when departing, but for the return trip, financial support was provided by the district.

While many students were satisfied with the facilities provided, some encountered challenges in adapting to new living environments. Lina shared that, at first, it was difficult to adapt, especially to the sweet food, and she felt hesitant to make friends because of her thick Papua accent. Meanwhile, Amelia expressed no concerns regarding the facilities, stating that there was absolutely nothing lacking.

Students reported receiving strong peer and mentor support. Selfi noted that she could socialize with people from different places when at school. Additionally, many students participated in social activities, such as Pramuka and church communities, which helped them integrate into their new environment.

The opportunity to study in a new environment provided students with transformative experiences. Jein described her cultural adaptation process, stating that the first thing she felt was being far from her parents, cultural differences, different ways of speaking, and different skin colors. Similarly, Yulius expressed his excitement at being invited to sing at an event in Semarang, stating that he was invited to perform in October as an extracurricular activity.

Table 2: Impacts of ADEM Program

Category	Aspect
Improvement	Intellectual Growth
	Structured Learning
	Academic Discipline
	Independence
	Social Adaptation
Achievement	Academic Competitions
	Science Interests
	Sports
	Extracurricular Activities
	Leadership Roles
Satisfaction with Program	Education System
	Financial Support
	Facilities
	Peer and Mentor Support
	Cultural Adaptation
	New Experiences

DISCUSSION

Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study align with previous research on the effectiveness of the ADEM program, while also providing new insights into the lived experiences of students. Studies by Winatha et al. (2021) and Martono et al. (2020) highlight the overall effectiveness of ADEM in providing educational access to underprivileged students, particularly those in remote and marginalized communities. Similar to these studies, our findings confirm that ADEM students generally experience academic improvement and increased social mobility. However, our study provides a more nuanced understanding of student experiences, particularly in terms of cultural adaptation and personal development.

Previous research (Rochadi et al., 2024) emphasized the role of ADEM in fostering nationalism among Papuan students by integrating them into Javanese education settings. Our findings confirm this trend, with many students expressing a strong sense of belonging to Indonesia. However, challenges remain, particularly regarding cultural adaptation, as highlighted by Lina's struggles with language and food differences. Compared to the study by Syakarofath et al. (2019), which focused on institutional challenges, our research adds depth by incorporating direct student experiences, offering practical insights into their daily struggles and successes.

Further, the study by Rochadi et al. (2024) demonstrated that the ADEM program was effective in increasing students' motivation and building inter-ethnic solidarity. Their findings indicated that 54.5% of students had high achievement motivation, while 46% demonstrated moderate inter-ethnic solidarity. This aligns with our study's observation that many students adapted well to the new environment and formed friendships with peers from different ethnic backgrounds. However, our study reveals a gap in social integration, as some students still struggle with cultural adjustments, particularly in food habits and language barriers.

Similarly, Syakarofath and Ni'matuzahoh (2019) identified that a major challenge in ADEM implementation was students' initial unpreparedness, financial constraints, and lack of social support. Their findings indicated that student adaptation was a key factor affecting their success in the program. Our study supports this claim, as students like Jein and Devina expressed difficulties in managing finances and socializing in the new school environment. Moreover, financial support remains a concern, as noted by Herin, who mentioned that initial transportation costs were not covered by the program.

Research by Pujiasih (2020) on social and cultural adaptation of Papuan students in Purwokerto found that students experienced significant difficulties when transitioning to a Javanese school environment, similar to our findings. The study emphasized that adaptation required strategic coping mechanisms, including social interactions and engagement in extracurricular activities, which our study also supports. Our findings show that students overcame cultural barriers through peer support and social participation.

Pramudiana and Setyorini (2019) examined the effects of culture shock on Papuan students studying in Magelang, revealing a significant negative correlation between culture shock and social adjustment. This aligns with our findings, as students expressed difficulties in adapting to the social norms and language in their new schools. Students like Lina and Yosep highlighted how differences in dialect and cultural expressions made it harder for them to integrate smoothly. However, our study also found that students developed adaptive strategies over time, such as forming close bonds with fellow Papuan students and participating in school-based social networks.

Gustiani et al. (2020) studied the effectiveness of the ADEM program in Catholic schools in Magelang and found that, while the program generally met its objectives, challenges persisted due to differences in culture, language, and access to support services. Similar to our findings, their study highlighted that adaptation difficulties were exacerbated by the lack of initial preparation before students relocated. While our research agrees with these findings, it also emphasizes that additional cultural mentoring and financial assistance could ease student transitions.

The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education (Mander et al., 2015) explored Aboriginal students' experiences transitioning to boarding schools in Western Australia. Their findings highlighted similar themes, including homesickness, identity struggles, and the need for a strong support system. In our study, homesickness and adaptation challenges were evident, as students like Jein and Yulius noted their struggles with cultural differences. While Mander et al. emphasized the need for more culturally responsive policies, our findings suggest that additional support systems such as peer mentoring and cultural immersion activities could further ease the transition process for ADEM students.

Overall, while previous studies have focused on policy implementation and macro-level effectiveness, our research contributes by centering student voices, emphasizing the social and emotional dimensions of their educational journey. Our findings underscore the need for additional social support mechanisms, better financial aid distribution, and more culturally inclusive practices to improve student adaptation and overall success in the ADEM program.

Application of Previous Theories

The findings of this study can be further analyzed using various theories related to social and academic adaptation in new environments. Cultural Adaptation Theory explains how individuals adjust to a new cultural environment, facing challenges in understanding and adapting to local norms, habits, and values. In this context, West Papuan students in the ADEM program encountered obstacles such as language differences, unfamiliar food, and distinct social interactions in Java. This adaptation process aligns with the U-Curve Model (Lysgaard, 1955), where students experience an initial honeymoon phase (excitement), followed by culture shock (difficulties in adjustment), and eventually reach the adaptation and integration phase. While most students managed to overcome these challenges, this study also highlights that some still struggle with social barriers, particularly in linguistic differences and difficulties in forming friendships with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, the findings can be examined through Social Development Theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978), which emphasizes that cognitive and social development is significantly influenced by interactions with others, including teachers, peers, and mentors. In the ADEM program, intensive social interactions within the school environment played a crucial role in shaping students' academic discipline and independence. Several students in this study reported increased learning motivation and social skills through participation in extracurricular activities and mentorship from teachers and peers. This finding suggests that a supportive social environment is a key factor in students' successful adaptation to their new setting.

Furthermore, Stress and Coping Theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) helps explain how students manage challenges during their transition period. This study found that West Papuan students experienced stress stemming from cultural differences, academic pressure, and financial constraints. However, they developed various coping strategies, such as forming peer support groups with fellow Papuan students, adopting a more independent lifestyle in managing finances, and seeking emotional support from mentors or teachers. These strategies align with a problem-focused coping approach, where individuals actively seek solutions, such as improving their learning skills and adjusting to new social environments.

Finally, Social Capital Theory, developed by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), is also relevant in explaining how social networks and interpersonal relationships support students' academic and social adaptation. This study found that students who had access to a strong support community—both through peer networks and school mentors—were better able to adapt and demonstrated improved academic performance. Participation in school organizations, such as student councils and scout programs, also helped them expand their social networks and increase their confidence in interacting with their new environment. Thus, social capital plays a significant role in fostering social integration and academic success for students in the ADEM program.

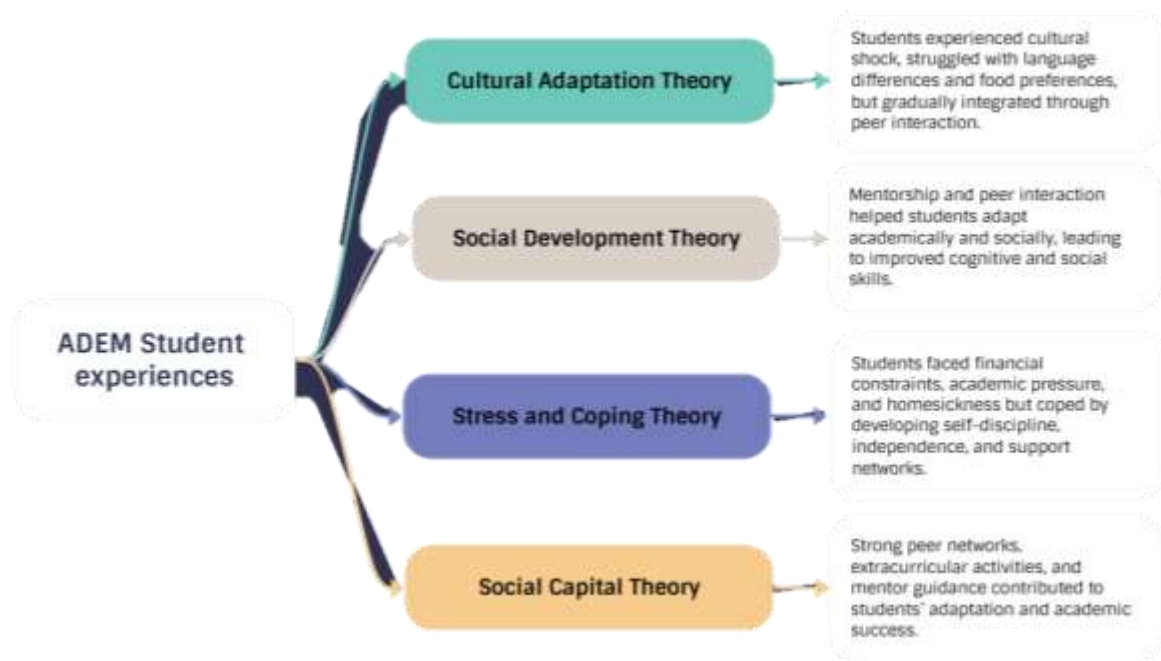


Figure 1: Application of Previous Theories

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the ADEM program has significantly contributed to the academic and personal development of West Papuan students in Central Java. Students reported enhanced intellectual growth, structured learning, and improved life skills, which contributed to their overall success in high school. However, challenges related to cultural adaptation, financial constraints, and social integration persisted. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on student voices, providing qualitative insights into their lived experiences and highlighting the nuanced challenges they face in adapting to a new educational and social environment.

This research has several limitations. The study was conducted with a limited number of participants, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among all ADEM students. Additionally, the research was conducted in a single region, limiting its generalizability to other provinces where ADEM students are placed. Future research should expand the sample size and include multiple regions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the program's impact. Furthermore, longitudinal studies tracking student outcomes beyond high school would be valuable in assessing the long-term effectiveness of the ADEM program.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made. Educational institutions should enhance support systems, including mentorship programs and peer networks, to ease cultural adaptation for ADEM students. Policymakers should consider increasing financial support to cover initial transition costs such as transportation and living expenses. Additionally, schools should implement cultural awareness programs for both Papuan and non-Papuan students to foster a more inclusive learning environment. These efforts will ensure that ADEM students receive the necessary support to thrive academically and socially in their new educational settings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by Direktorat Pembinaan PK-LK and Ditjen Pendidikan Dasar dan Menengah Kemdikbud.

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