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When education takes a back seat

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ONE minute it was like a normal school with some semblance of orderliness and the next, it was a rat's nest. Our reporters had barely walked into the compound of SK Pos Tohoi, deep in the jungles of Gua Musang, that Saturday morning to find out more about the seven children who went missing from the school, when it almost appeared as if all hell had broken loose. In no time, the children were out of their classes. Their teacher's voice was barely audible as they began playing, running around, sliding down the ramp next to the staircase or teasing those who were looking at us wide-eyed. Their teacher's advice to "tolong masuk kelas" — even guiding some of them by the shoulders — appeared to fall on deaf ears. She could have been talking to a brick wall. Even as we left the school compound some 30 minutes later, the children were still oblivious to their teacher's pleas. This is just a fraction of the challenges that teachers posted to Orang Asli schools in the interior face every day.

"It is a whole new ball game. Teaching in an Orang Asli school is both mentally and physically challenging," says Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, 56, the former headmaster of SK Pos Musoh in Tapah, Perak. The challenges include familiarising oneself with the community, the physical stress of travelling to a school far in the interior and being exposed to risks such as wild animals and landslides. "The biggest challenge is, of course, making the Orang Asli realise the importance of an education because it is not on their list of priorities as they have lived in the jungle all their lives." The Orang Asli, he adds, are a very reserved, shy and tightly-knit community and to gain their trust and convince them to send their children to school is no easy feat. "We had to go to their houses many times bearing gifts such as oil and flour. We had to sit down with them, share a meal and talk to them for a long time to convince them that their children were like our children and that we would take good care of them," Zulkifli explains. He says in the Orang Asli culture, reprimanding a child is almost a taboo. "They love their children very much but instilling discipline is a challenge as they don't believe in reprimanding their children. Even raising one's voice at a child would be seen as a grave mistake and they would take it to heart," he adds.

Communication is another barrier when dealing with the Orang Asli. "They see teachers as people from the outside and Bahasa Melayu is not their primary language. Sometimes in class they will continue to speak in their own dialect and it's up to the teacher to try to familiarise themselves with their language so that they are able to relate better to the students," he notes. As there are no preschool facilities in the villages, the initial schooling experience can be a scary one for the children. "They are scared of the unfamiliar surroundings, especially when they are separated from their families," Zulkifli says, adding that it would be helpful if such schools have a pre-school facility so that the younger Orang Asli children can get used to the idea of going to school.

Universiti Malaya lecturer Dr Vishalache Balakrishnan, who specialises in moral and multicultural education, says it is a challenge for teachers who are trained in a homogenous setting to teach students in a completely different environment. “The first few weeks of teaching is usually focused on teaching them basic hygiene like brushing their teeth, combing their hair, showering long enough with soap and shampoo and wearing a complete uniform and to be neat and tidy. This is then followed by other aspects such as focusing on school work, respecting their friends and setting targets in their school life.” Although school children often play truant, the challenge of dealing with an Orang Asli child is totally different, she adds. “Usually urban school students stay away from school by going to shopping malls or video arcades. “Orang Asli children who feel sad, homesick or not happy with the teaching and learning environment, ‘run’ into the nearby jungle. The jungle has been their habitat from young and climbing a tree, plucking and eating wild fruits or swimming in the river gives them the feeling of being free and happy,” notes Vishalache.

Zulkifli adds that the carefree attitude of some students who cannot conform to a classroom structure could also test the patience of the teachers. “There are times when the children don’t feel the need to attend classes and we have to look for them in their houses and convince them to come to school.” 55 reads

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