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Teachers must be specially trained

UNDERSTANDING: In this final part of a series on educating Orang Asli children, experts suggest that it may be useful to conduct a course for teachers on how to deal with students from indigenous communities, write Suzanna Pillay, Audrey Vijandren and Ili Liyana Mokhtar

TEACHERS posted to Orang Asli schools need to be given additional training for approaches in teaching these children.

"Many a time, teachers are blamed for not understanding the Orang Asli students.

"But, have the teachers posted to schools specially constructed for Orang Asli students been given extra training to deal with them? Do these teachers understand the Orang Asli culture?" asked Universiti Malaya senior lecturer Dr Vishalache Balakrishnan.

She said some teachers commented that they did not want to be posted to these Orang Asli schools.

"This is a serious issue because when individuals decide to be teachers in government schools, they sign an agreement with the Education Ministry (MOE) that they are willing to serve anywhere in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah or Sarawak. But, when they are posted to interior areas, they seem frustrated, angry and rebel. This anger is sometimes taken out on naïve Orang Asli students who, given a chance, would not want to be in school either," said Vishalache, who specialises in moral and multicultural education.

She said another aspect that should be considered was the perspective of the Orang Asli student.

"Society in general is frustrated over the treatment they get in schools and how their psychology must have been disturbed because of the way they are treated.

"These students are usually away from their natural habitat; the jungle

environment and are provided the national syllabus, which has been tweaked to suit their environment.

"It is a great way to reach out to Orang Asli students as they relate better to the environment that is closer to them. I know that the syllabus has been specially constructed for them, but I am not sure if textbooks and reading materials are specially prepared based on this syllabus."

She said her post-graduate students, who had taught in Orang Asli schools, found it a challenge to teach in a completely different environment as they were trained in a homogenous setting.

"But, there are excellent teachers who adapt very well to the environment," she said, recounting the case of one of her post-graduate students who had to teach the students basic hygiene during the first few weeks.

"She had her share of challenges when students in the hostel upturned the sofa to 'perch' themselves on the edge, threw dirt tied in a plastic bag from upstairs and unscrewed the fans and other electrical equipment. My student, being a Religious and Moral Education teacher, was extremely patient and used all her motherly approaches to educate the students."

Vishalache said the authorities should learn from the recent SK Pos Tohoi tragedy and ensure that teachers posted to these schools were given extra in-house training on how to teach Orang Asli children.

"Continuous moral support is also necessary for the teachers and students. Moral conviction for the teaching profession is especially needed for teachers to take their vocation as a great responsibility to educate the Orang Asli students.

"The students should be treated with dignity, respect and extra compassion as they are taken away from their natural environment."

Vishalache said the Education Ministry should form partnerships with non-governmental organisations to support the teaching team in these schools, so that societal support and communal collaboration becomes the spine for helping Orang

Asli students and the community to help themselves.

"As the African proverb goes, 'it takes a village to raise a child'. It's time we worked together and think of solutions to the issue instead of venting our anger and frustration as it will not resolve these problems."

The former headmaster of SK Pos Musoh in Perak, Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, agreed that it was best to prepare teachers before they were posted to schools for Orang Asli students.

He said sending young, energetic teachers together with experienced teachers could result in faster progress or work in favour of getting more Orang Asli children to attend schools.

"However, it is important to expose the teachers to the interior, how to approach the students and earn the trust of the community."

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Orang Asli boys in Kampung Temabaga, Gua Musang, Kelantan. Pic courtesy of Colin Nicholas