

<http://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2015/11/29/support-teachers-in-remote-schools/>

Education

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Education](#)

Sunday, 29 November 2015

Support teachers in remote schools



Disadvantaged kids: The habits of orang asli children are quite different from their peers raised in urban areas. Considering their background, teachers should be extra patient and compassionate when dealing with children from the community. — File photo

THE past few months have not been good for academics like me who educate teachers-to-be for humanistic subjects like Moral Education.

The recent case of the seven missing orang asli students from SK Tohoi in Gua Musang, Kelantan, and the subsequent deaths of five of them, was indeed sad.

It was reported that the children could have resorted to running away from school because of neglect and abuse at the hands of those in authority. This is just too much to digest.

Where did we go wrong? Are we just going to play the blame game yet again?

Are we going to calm society by stating that investigations are ongoing, and individuals responsible will be punished? Or are we going to analyse the root of the problem which seems to be occurring quite frequently?

With orang asli villages scattered in the interior, getting to school can take many hours or days.

So, many parents have no choice but to send their children to school where boarding facilities are provided for them. The parting is painful for both parents and children.

At school they expect sympathy and kindness but that is not always the case.

In SK Tohoi, the primary school children were disturbed and upset by the treatment they had in school.

They should have been treated with patience and compassion by teachers and those in authority. In fact, each orang asli child should have been given special attention.

I have had students – teachers pursuing their post-graduate studies at Universiti Malaya – who have taught orang asli children. While it can be challenging, it is also a different experience teaching children from remote areas as their habits are different from those in urban areas.

For instance, practices that have become part of our daily regime may not be so for them.

Brushing one's hair, showering and using soap and shampoo and even wearing school uniforms complete with shoes and socks, form part of our routine each day.

But such practices are not important concerns to most orang asli children.

Let me share what one of my students experienced at an orang asli school where she was posted as a Moral Education teacher.

She was surprised at how garbage bags were thrown by the students from the top floor.

It was not easy, but the children had to be educated and reminded for many weeks before they fully understood the importance of carrying the garbage bags to the ground floor.

The teacher was equally concerned with the vandalising of school furniture and electrical items.

In explaining the importance of respecting property, she had to exercise much patience and understanding when managing her charges.

She also noted that students in urban schools played truant by heading to shopping malls, video arcades and the cinemas.

But for orang asli children, they have no place to run to but the jungle.

Coming from such an environment, it is only natural that they seek solace there.

Teachers who are posted to schools specifically with orang children are blamed for not understanding their orang asli students.

However, are they briefed enough to understand the culture and mindset of the orang asli? There are many tribes in the community, each with their own distinct practices and traditions.

Teachers need to know about their habits and beliefs in order to understand them better.

Many teachers pledge to serve in schools in urban or remote areas.

However, when they are actually posted to schools in the interior, they are unhappy.

Their anger and frustration is manifested in negative ways onto their young charges.

The children being the victims have no one to turn to. With no solution in sight, they resort to running away through rugged terrain to their villages which can take between a few hours to a few days!

There are several lessons to be learnt from the unfortunate SK Tohoi incident.

Firstly, teachers posted to such schools must be given extra training for approaches and pedagogies to teach orang asli students.

Teachers and their charges must also get continuous moral support. There must be conviction and teachers need to take their vocation as a great responsibility to educate orang asli students.

The students should be treated with dignity, respect and compassion as the boarding school setting is quite different from their dwellings in the interior.

The Education Ministry should form partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to support the teaching team in such schools.

Such initiatives are necessary to help the orang asli students and their community.

It takes a village to raise a child, according to an African proverb.

And in the case of the orang asli, we need the relevant authorities and NGOs to work together and think of solutions in educating and uplifting the community.

**Dr VISHALACHE BALAKRISHNAN,
New Zealand**