



One way to keep Orang Asli children in school is to use more creative and fun teaching methods.

Village in school feel for Orang Asli students

N.S.T 27/10/07 M/S 14

‘Adventure’ learning will rope them in

SLIM RIVER: The new approach to educating the Orang Asli has received the thumbs up from University of Malaya anthropologist Dr Juli Edo, the second Orang Asli in the country to obtain a doctorate.

Juli said it was common for many parents to feel that education was not worth it because they could not see an immediate and beneficial result from it.

He cited the recent start of the new school year in Pahang’s Batau area, which saw 300 out of 500 Orang Asli students failing to show up for classes.

Worse still, if the Orang Asli students fail their Penilaian Menengah Rendah examination in Form Three (which many of them do), they will face a double jeopardy: They will not be able to find work in mainstream society but at the same time, they will have also lost their traditional abilities or skills.

“I see two things we need to do, and one of them is to attract the attention of the Orang Asli children

■ **By Koh Lay Chin**
laych@nst.com.my

SLIM RIVER: Teacher Kamarul Azizi was grinning from ear to ear when we met for the interview.

The reason? He had two absentees in his class.

Surely that's bad, one may ask. The answer was an emphatic "no", not when it was normal for half of the class to be absent.

The reason for the better-than-usual attendance rate was because "important people" were visiting Sekolah Kebangsaan Pos Bersih, a school for the Orang Asli, that day. The school is in Ulu Slim, near here.

And it was not only the students who had turned up in full force but also their parents. It looked as if a third of the village had turned up at the school.

"It is rare for us to even achieve an 80 per cent attendance for the school, but today, the villagers have heard that there are visitors, and that usually means food and activities, so they hang around with their children," Kamarul said, gesturing at the many parents sitting in the corridors or squatting beside the classrooms.

It is things like these which have made the Education Ministry realise that a new approach is needed when it comes to providing education in Orang Asli schools.

Hence, the visitors to SK Pos Bersih on that day.

The ministry's Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) is leading a team to come up with a new and revised curriculum for six Orang



Hasmah Abdul Manaf says angry parents have scolded teachers

Asli schools, out of 93 nationwide.

As shown by SK Pos Bersih, getting students to even attend class or stay in school is a major hurdle at schools in Orang Asli areas. All it takes is a rainy day for most of the 175 students to stay home.

Villagers in the area, who are mostly from the Semai group, would rather their children help them sell *petai* or collect *gaharu* (a fragrant and expensive sandalwood).

Hasmah Abdul Manaf, assistant director of the CDC, said: "Some of us were even scolded by angry parents for being stern with their children. We are talking about standard teacher-talk like 'Keep quiet' or 'Sit down and don't make noise'.

"When the parents get offended, they keep their children at



Kamarul Azizi says it's normal for half the class to be absent

home for two days or sometimes two months."

So how will a new curriculum change the scenario for the Orang Asli, one-third of whom drop out before Year Six, and then out of that, only half reach Form Five?

It would be different strokes for different folks, Hasmah said, and chief among their strategies to keep the students in school was to use more "creative and fun" teaching methods.

The CDC is visiting Orang Asli schools and settlements to gather feedback to fine-tune the new curriculum.

"We are looking to first chatting with the parents, taking it light and easy and getting them involved. We want them to feel like they are wanted in the school and that it will be fun, safe and benefi-

cial for their children."

As the Orang Asli students have to grapple with a language barrier, the CDC is looking at a two-week orientation for those entering Year One, with parents playing a crucial role.

The Year One curriculum will be divided into two levels: The first revolving around fun and outdoor-based lessons and the second, a gentle and gradual introduction to the subjects.

"If they have any difficulties, we will hold them back for one year," she said.

The star of the new curriculum will be the Culture and Heritage Module, which teaches students more about their community and parents' skills and way of life, so that these elements will not be lost in their education.

The students will observe and learn about traditional skills and crafts, such as traditional hunting or farming tools and musical instruments.

"We want them to feel their village is in the school too, and to know their own history so that it will not die.

"They can learn more about traditional medicines or how to recognise plants, and these lessons can be conducted by the river or under a tree," she said.

The CDC will introduce the curriculum soon under a pilot project in six Orang Asli schools: SK Pos Bersih, Ulu Slim, Perak; SK Sungai Mas, Sungai Lembing, Pahang; SK Sempo, Negri Sembilan; SK Pasir Linggi, Kelantan; SK Busuk Baru, Selangor and SK Punan, Johor.

so they remain in school, and the other is to address their poverty and socio-economic environment.

"These children get to climb trees and play in the river when they are at home so they don't think school is very interesting. Education, therefore, should be more adventurous," he said.

Even using the television or computers for studies will be more appealing to the children than the classroom lessons, he said, adding that a different three-year start for the Orang Asli students before they joined the mainstream curriculum would be beneficial.

"People might say that is discrimination but I think for this special group 'positive discrimination' could work, as they are clearly disadvantaged right from the start," he said.

Teacher Ibas Reman, a Semai, also welcomed the proposed curriculum for the Orang Asli schools, describing it as a practical strategy.

He smiled as two of his Year Two charges giggled and asked for permission to drink water from a nearby tap. Almost immediately, two other pupils ran out after them.

"They are restless and want to move around a lot.

"Language is not a barrier for teachers here as we are not located as deep into the interior as other Orang Asli communities, but the children tend to communicate more with me.

"Teachers, therefore, will be an important aspect," he said, as a child tumbled around him laughing.