

# Getting the kids back in school

IN the first month of this year's school session alone, the nationwide dropout rate among Orang Asli children was 24.6%. StarEdu speaks to Department of Orang Asli Development (Jakoa) director-general Datuk Ajis Sitin to find out why.

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DATUK Ajis Sitin, 56, is on a mission to get the indigenous kids back in school. Jakoa's first Orang Asli director-general is a Semai tribesman from Ulu Jerai, Kuala Lipis, Pahang. A civil engineer by training, he doesn't think his previous role is that different from his current responsibilities.

"It's important to go back to the basics. As an engineer, I'm well-versed in financial, project, and people management. These are the same skills needed to help improve the welfare of the Orang Asli. I understand their issues because I am from the community."

"I've lived in the jungle, trapped squirrels and fished in the river. Now, I'm sitting in an office facing the majestic Petronas Twin Towers in the heart of KL," said the father-of-nine.

## We've come a long way

Recalling how he and his two brothers were among the country's first generation of Orang Asli children to go to school, Ajis said it wasn't easy although his school was only a kilometre away from the village.

"Today, some 90% of Orang Asli parents have been to school and can read. In the 70s, our parents couldn't even say the alphabet."

"My father would always ask us boys to help our mother tap rubber. While he never encouraged us to study, neither did he stop us from going to school. It was up to us. So

we relied on our own initiative." Determined to make something of himself, Ajis went to a Jakoa-run school in the village. At the time, Orang Asli schools were run by the department and the teachers were Jakoa staff.

"Some of our teachers only had Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP) qualification but they were dedicated and did their best. These Jakoa schools were only meant to teach us the basics."

"Orang Asli kids in the villages would study in such schools from Years One to Three before moving to a proper mainstream school in the district."

Now Orang Asli education is under the ministry. It was something Jakoa pushed hard for.

"Things are much better now. When I was a student, there was discrimination. Some called us stupid. Some teachers gave up on us just because we were Orang Asli."

"I was poor and I wasn't a looker. But I was smart. And I always made sure my clothes were clean. Though I felt different, I was friendly to everyone."

## Why they're dropping out

The high dropout rate among Orang Asli students is among Jakoa's challenge, he admits.

Villages in the town and city fringes have been catered for. All the infrastructure is there. The 'hardcore' areas that need urgent attention are Ulu Kelantan, Ulu Pahang, and Ulu Perak.

The location, and ecosystem of schools, the lack of peers to look up

Ajis is determined to help improve the welfare of the Orang Asli so that the kids can go to school.



to, the absence of parental support, and low motivation and literacy among the students themselves, are why students generally dropout.

At preschool, the lack of parental encouragement, and the wrong teaching approach result in children not wanting to go to kindergarten. Mastery of reading, writing, and counting (3M) skills are not a priority for some at primary level. These pupils have low self esteem,

and are not confident of their ability to learn. For secondary students, social, disciplinary and personality issues are the cause. They're easily influenced by their friends to dropout, and have problems interacting with those from other ethnic groups.

In most cases, Orang Asli kids dropout because they cannot cope, Ajis thinks.

There are some 78 hostels in the peninsula for school-going Orang Asli kids who live in far-flung villages.

"These kids are very young. They struggle to cope when they're separated from their parents. We can't expect kids aged seven or eight to care for themselves. Only the really driven, resilient ones will stay on."

## Keeping them in school

Ajis said keeping them in school means making sure that they're comfortable.

Hostels for Orang Asli kids should have chaperones from the different villages. With a familiar face around, the kids won't feel lost and alone.

"The Orang Asli community is a very close knit family. It's like that in every village," he said, adding that another pressing issue is to take care of their basic needs.

To ensure that these kids are not left out of mainstream education, we have to make sure that every child has shoes and uniforms, transport, scholarships, and pocket money for school.

"It's the bare minimum. Without these necessities, they won't go to school."

Jakoa conducts initiatives like the Education Exposure, Let's Go to School, and 3M Mastery programmes. These are aimed at pre-

schoolers and primary pupils to ensure their successful integration into mainstream education. Motivational programmes for parents are also conducted. The department, which looks after the welfare of the Orang Asli community, works closely with the Education Ministry to encourage dropouts to go back to school.

Several working committees have been set up to carry out mindset transformation, parent and community involvement (PIBK), camps and special orientation, and mentor-mentee programmes, at grass-root level to bring and promote mainstream education in Orang Asli communities.

"Everywhere I go, I tell these families that education is crucial if you want success. But we must be realistic and address their needs first."

## Everyone has a role

Ajis welcomes experts and non-governmental organisations keen on assisting the community in education, to approach Jakoa. With the help of volunteers, more intervention programmes can be carried out to narrow the performance gap between schools in different locations, and with varying needs.

Many varsities and private companies have already gone into the villages to help.

The Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and CIMB project in Pos Gob has really made a difference, he said.

"The dropouts were invited to join a community school in the village and today, these kids have managed to get back into the mainstream education system and are coping well."

CLUTCHING their 'discovery kits', the Orang Asli kids skipped off into the jungle.

In well-worn slippers, they make their way past the muddy path, crossing a stream along the way.

Mats are laid out in front of a rickety bamboo shack. They eagerly open their kits, filled with pens, note pads, plastic containers and magnifying glasses.

After a quick briefing on their 'mission', these Hutan's Classroom participants rush off.

Two hours later, they re-group, excitedly holding up the containers now filled with insects, shrimps, fishes, tadpoles, lizards, praying mantises, grasshoppers and leeches.

Zurina Mohd Forizal, 11, enjoyed the morning with her friends.

She's one of the few who attends mainstream school.

"My favourite subjects in class are Bahasa Melayu, English, Science and Mathematics. But I like learning in the jungle better because I come here with my parents when I'm not in school. I help them tap rubber," the shy Year Five pupil said.

Orang Asli kids learn better in the jungle because it's the environment they're most comfortable in, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) committee member Dr Muhammad Heikal Ismail recently discovered.

"Today they're learning about living things in the jungle."

The Celik Volunteer Club (CVC) adviser has been conducting classes at the Orang Asli village in Kampung Kachau Luar, Semenyih, with club president Amirrudin Azmi, 24, since March last year.

Initially, classes were held at the village surau from 10am till noon.

About 20 to 30 children aged between four and 12 attend the classes.

But, Dr Muhammad Heikal, who's also a senior lecturer at the UPM chemical and environmental engineering department, found that the children's minds would wander.

"It was tough. Their attention span's very short. Less than an hour and they would get fidgety. Some would get up and leave."

It wasn't until December that Hutan's Classroom - a STREAM (Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) learning method inspired by nature - came about.

The method was the result of a collaboration between UPM, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) and TFA Academy, said Dr Muhammad Heikal.

"The method was designed specifically for Orang Asli kids. Classes were moved from the surau to the jungle because this is where they feel most at home."

"After just one month, we saw results. The progress and feedback were positive. More kids started turning up and those who were

# Jungle learning



The orang asli kids looking for fishes, leeches, tadpoles, and crabs, in the stream.



Dr Muhammad Heikal (far right) talking to the orang asli kids about the creatures in the stream.



Amirrudin teaching the orang asli kids about the insects and animals they collected.

with us from day one would stay for the whole two-hour session. They asked questions. They're excited. They want to learn."

"And they understand better. The environment and the method made a huge difference. Even I was surprised."

Encouraged, CVC's now conducting science classes in the jungle.

"When we started, the goal was just to get the children to read and write basic stuff. Remember, most of them don't go to school. Some can't even write their names."

"Now, these kids are ready to move on from ABCs to bigger challenges. Since last month, we've been

conducting science classes inspired by the 'Little Einsteins' interactive preschool series that introduces kids to nature," said Dr Muhammad Heikal.

Next up, said Amirrudin, is to explore the potential of jungle resources.

The Cendawan Project will see them taking kids into the jungle to identify items that are edible.

And come July, Hutan's Classroom will see the kids moving on to technology under the Supernova project. The duo will be working with non-governmental organisations to expose the kids to computers and set up library facilities at the surau.

They'll also be collaborating with UPM to bring food printing technology to the village.

Dr Muhammad Heikal is excited. It's his research area.

He's planning to show the community how 3D food printers can convert jungle resources into tasty products.

"I want to get the children excited about what they can do with the resources available to them. Maybe by experiencing technology, they'll want to learn and be part of it."

Founded by the two friends in March last year, the CVC was set up to promote literacy among children, said Amirrudin.

The focus is on teaching marginalised kids who have fallen through the cracks because of poverty.

At the moment, they're the only full-time volunteers.

"We have 10 other volunteers but they cannot commit to a fixed schedule. We're hoping that some companies or individuals - especially students - can join us."

Among the first-time volunteers who turned up with lunch, and beloved toys and clothes, were engineer Muhammad Zulhusni, 27, his wife Munirah Rosdi, 29, and former National Service Training Programme (better known by its Malay acronym PLKN) trainer Farahiza Saupi, 38.

Munirah, who has always been interested in volunteer work, stumbled on the club on social media.

"I've been looking for a worthy cause for some time now. It's scary sometimes even if your intention is good because there are so many scammers these days."

"Then I came across Hutan's Classroom. I asked friends if they were willing to chip in for some food." She believes that many are like her - wanting to help genuine causes but not knowing how to go about it. And she's planning on rounding up others to come teach the kids.

"My husband and I come from architectural backgrounds so maybe we can teach them about buildings and if there are funds, we can even take them into the city to see the sky scrapers."

Encouraging youngsters, especially students, to volunteer, she said activities like these not only benefit society, but can help improve soft skills like communication and teamwork.

Farahiza, who brought her four-month-old baby and nine-year-old son along, came because she wanted to know more about the project.

"I was a PLKN trainer for almost two decades and we had many activities in the jungle. Since I'm a housewife now, I can share my experience, train the volunteers, or teach the kids."

She brought her eldest to expose him to others who haven't had the opportunities he's had.

"It's important to learn to give back to the community from a young age. It makes me sad to see that we still have children who cannot read or write despite how developed the country is."

Tearing up, she asked: "If not us, who else? It's our responsibility as Malaysians to help where we can."

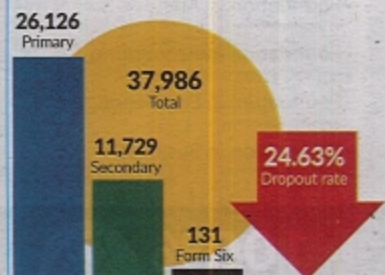
By CHRISTINA CHIN

For details on CVC's activities, log on to <https://www.facebook.com/HutanClassroom/>

Watch the video  [thestartv.com](http://thestartv.com)



## Orang Asli children in schools (as at Jan 2019)



Source: Education Ministry



# Semelai top scorer shares success tips

EDUCATION is the only path to a better future.

Despite being looked down on in her early schooling years, Nor Faiza Rosidin, 20 - this year's best student in the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) 2018 (Orang Asli category) - always held her head up high.

"Mental abuse was among the challenges I faced but I never thought of dropping out."

"The experience has made me grow as a person. It's given me the maturity to face the future with more confidence."

"Staying in school was the only way I could change my family's fortune for the better. I had to convince my parents to let me sit for the STPM because they were

worried it would be too difficult for me. "Once I assured them that I would give my best, they relented. So, I couldn't let them down."

The eldest of five children born to rubber tapper parents, Nor Faiza from the Semelai tribe scored a cumulative grade point average (CGPA) score of 3.83.

Although her parents dropped out of primary school, they understand the importance of education and want it for their children.

No matter their background, students can succeed if they stop making excuses, she said.

"Having negative thoughts is normal but you must find a way around it. Ask for help. Don't be shy."

That's how we learn.

"Once you've made up your mind to study, you must go all the way. Finish what you started."

Nor Faiza hopes to enrol into Universiti Malaya and major in education, particularly in the field of special education. She wants to learn sign language to communicate with the deaf.

"This is my chance to make a difference in the lives of the disabled community. My twin sister cannot speak and has learning difficulties. Our family cannot communicate with her and it makes me sad. Society looks at these special people as though they're the ones with a problem. But it's actually us who have failed to try and understand them."



Nor Faiza showing off her award.