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This teacher's hands-on approach to teaching Orang Asli children unleashes the joy of learning

By Elena Koshy - March 3, 2024 @ 10:00am



Shawn is determined to give his students a fighting chance to excel in their studies.

IN this nondescript school nestled within the dense forests of Perak's hinterlands, every day can be far from ordinary. Here, amidst the lush wilderness, where tigers occasionally wander through the school grounds and disgruntled elephants have been known to uproot water pipes, the Orang Asli students sit in rapt attention as Cikgu Shawn Stanly Anthony Dass holds court during science class.

At Sekolah Kebangsaan RPS Banun, lessons can actually take flight. Well, sometimes literally — if Shawn can help it. "How do you even begin to teach these children when they've not been exposed to anything?" he muses.

Within these walls, students — for whom the forest is the entirety of their known universe — are introduced to realms and concepts utterly alien to them.

Shawn uses inventive and hands-on teaching approaches to bridge the gap between his students and concepts unfamiliar to them, ranging from the democratic process of voting to the thrill of air travel, and the discovery of expansive oceans and beaches, making these alien experiences more accessible and comprehensible.

On one instance, he created an engaging lesson on democracy, transforming his classroom into a lively election scene. He selected four students as candidates for the role of class monitor, setting the stage for a hands-on learning experience about voting.

The exercise went beyond selecting a class monitor; it simulated the electoral process to teach students how to choose a leader based on promises and potential.

Despite their initial unfamiliarity, the students enthusiastically embraced the challenge. Some candidates promised to keep the classroom tidy, while others pledged to ensure books were properly arranged, he recounts with a laugh.

Shawn designed a straightforward voting system for the students, complete with ballot sheets where they marked an X for their choice, and even included candidate photos to simulate a real election.

"I showed them how voting works in real life," he recalls, detailing how they'd select a candidate by photo and cast their vote by marking the ballot, which was then placed into a ballot box he crafted himself.

After the ballots were cast and counted, a winner was declared, offering a practical demonstration of how leaders are chosen in wider society. Although the students may not have grasped the entire complexity of electoral systems, his innovative approach provided them with a foundational understanding of voting and leadership.



Shawn the 'pilot' taking his students on a flight to Paris, France.

On another occasion, he transformed the entire class into the interior of an aeroplane. His "flight simulation" idea was mooted when one of his students asked: "*Best tak kalau naik kapal terbang*? (Is it nice to go on an airplane?)"

He shakes his head and says quietly: "That question somehow bugged me for days. These kids didn't have any opportunity to even go out of their village. Even a trip to town was a big deal to them."

Continuing, he sighs: "I'm not super rich. If only I could buy my own aeroplane and take them all on a trip!" Shawn transformed his classroom into an airplane's cockpit, dressed

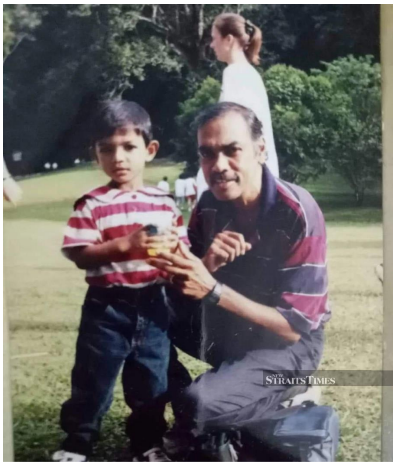
in a pilot's uniform, and turned the projector aimed at the whiteboard into the airplane's window.

Using a hailer, he spoke to the transfixed Orang Asli students, mimicking the announcements a pilot would make. On that day that "Air Banun" took its inaugural flight.

During this imaginative "flight", he transported his students to diverse destinations such as Paris, the pyramids of Egypt and the Himalayas. "At each stop, I shared interesting facts about the location!" he recounts with a smile, quipping: "That's when I realised my degree in international relations really came in handy!"

Running his hand through his wavy hair, the bearded young man beams at me as he recalls his experiences in Gerik, Perak. It's evident that teaching isn't just a job for him, but a true calling he's deeply passionate about.

HUMBLE START



Shawn had a close relationship with his late father

Shawn, the youngest of three siblings, grew up in Penang. His father was a lab technician and his mother worked as a cleaner. "We lived simply," he shares.

"Initially, I attended an international school' where my father was employed, but when I turned 7, I transitioned to a government school," he recalls. He continued his education at Sekolah Kebangsaan Batu Lanchang up until Standard Six.

At the age of 13, Shawn faced a devastating turn of events. His father passed away following a prolonged illness. This happened just two weeks after he enrolled in a new school to pursue his secondary education.

"I was very close to my father," he explains quietly, adding: "He took me everywhere and did everything for me. Now I had to learn to be independent. It was a painful process."

The troubled young boy began to act out, quickly finding himself embroiled in numerous troubles at school. "I got into fights and faced a slew of disciplinary issues," he admits sheepishly.



With Lim Ah Seng, the teacher who changed his life.

He might have been written off as a lost cause were it not for one teacher who recognised his potential. "There was this well-respected teacher, Lim Ah Seng. Unlike the others who'd given up on me, he believed in my capacity for change."

Lim adopted an unconventional approach with Shawn, unexpectedly appointing him as a prefect. "I was just as surprised. But he encouraged me to give it a shot and see what unfolds," reminisces Shawn. He grew to see Lim not just as a teacher but also as a father figure, someone who was always there for him regardless of the challenges he faced.

His methods worked because Shawn eventually became the school's head prefect some years later. In fact, when he was 16, Shawn was awarded a full scholarship as an ambassador to the Anthony Robbins Foundation Global Youth Leadership Summit in San Diego, California, in 2013.



From a troubled kid, Shawn (centre) went on to be the head prefect of his school.

"My life turned around because of a teacher," he shares, adding: "But back then, I wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer. Never a teacher!"

That would soon change.

During a nine-month break before university, Shawn tutored for extra income and realised the stark educational disparities facing underprivileged students.

"It was an eye-opener," he reflects, acknowledging how education varied from a privilege to a luxury, highlighting the inaccessibility of learning opportunities for those from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

One particularly striking experience was with a 16-year-old student, who could barely read. After several months of tutoring him, Shawn observed significant progress.

This experience was transformative, solidifying his desire to pursue a career in education. "I was blessed to receive so many learning opportunities and I wanted the same for other children as well."

However, when the time came to apply for university, he faced a setback. His first choice was education, but he was instead offered a place in international relations.

"I was crushed. I desperately wanted to become a teacher, but the cost of private colleges and universities was so expensive, and I didn't want to burden my mother. After some thought, I decided to go ahead with it," he says.

ROAD TO TEACHING



With his proud mother and brother on his graduation day.

Shawn embarked on his higher education journey at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, pursuing a degree in social science, which he majored in international relations. Yet, the calling to teach remained undiminished within him.

During a visit to the Filipino market at the end of his first year, Shawn encountered children selling plastic bags, revealing the struggles of undocumented children overlooked by the system. This led him to discover alternative learning centres for such children, where he began volunteering as a teacher.

While at university, Shawn also got involved in Teach for Malaysia (TFM) through its campus outreach. Post-graduation, he worked in TFM's Talent & Acquisition team, recruiting fellows for their Fellowship Programme, before becoming a coordinator for special projects. At 25, he finally seized the chance to join the Fellowship Programme as a teacher, committing two years to the cause.

The newly minted fellow was soon assigned to Gerik, Perak, where he took on the role of teaching science and music to the Orang Asli children from the Temiar and Jahai tribes.

INTO THE JUNGLE



With his mentor, Cikgu Johari Idris.

"I had no idea what I was in for," he confesses, adding: "The only thing I knew of Gerik was seeing it on a signboard once!"

When he stepped into the remote school surrounded by 18 Orang Asli villages within the dense forest, he was understandably nervous. "I wondered if I'd be accepted as a teacher in this school…" he remembers.

Thankfully, the young TFM fellow was paired with a senior teacher, Johari Idris, the senior assistant of student affairs in the school. "He became my mentor," says Shawn.

Johari, who'd also been recently assigned to the school, joined forces with Shawn to address the pressing challenges faced by Orang Asli schools.

"There was a time when Cikgu Johari was at the helm of the class teaching while I stood at the back, when I caught sight of a student holding his text book upside down," he recalls dryly.

This observation stunned them and led to a critical realisation: the need to overhaul their teaching methodology as the conventional pedagogy wasn't applicable here.

The school faced challenges such as low literacy and high dropout rates, common in Orang Asli community schools, due to ineffective teaching methods.

"Teaching from text books didn't work, neither did worksheets," recounts Shawn. The duo shifted from traditional classrooms to exploratory learning, using the school's natural surroundings to enhance lessons.



Shawn uses inventive and hands-on approaches to teach.

Through trial and error, they incorporated videos, visuals, and physical activities; making education more interactive and engaging for their students.

By moving away from traditional methods and embracing a more practical, experiential form of education, they observed a significant improvement in student attendance, particularly in Year Six classes.



Shawn and his class of eager students at Sekolah Kebangsaan RPS Banun.

From a small group of 15-16 students, attendance soared to over 50, driven by the students' newfound enthusiasm for a learning model that allowed them to actively participate and engage with the material in a meaningful way.

Shawn reflects on the deeply ingrained prejudices he encountered before joining the school, where the Orang Asli children were underestimated and dismissed by broader societal narratives.

"I was told not to bother too much with the Orang Asli children as efforts to educate them were seen as futile. They were unfairly labelled as forgetful, incapable of progress and inherently lazy," Shawn shares, highlighting the pervasive and damaging stereotypes that had been passed down through generations.

This negative perception had even begun to influence the children's self-view, contributing to their silence and acceptance of these limiting beliefs.



Creating a 'beach' model for his students who have never seen the ocean.

"It wasn't that the children couldn't learn or lacked potential. The issue was the absence of belief in their abilities," emphasises Shawn. He noticed the students' initial passivity

and shyness, with their low self-esteem manifesting so strongly that they struggled to speak out in class without their lips trembling.

But a remarkable transformation occurred as he and his colleagues continued to implement new, more engaging teaching methods — the students began to blossom and open up.

When confronted with scepticism about his students' potential, he responds confidently, dismissing such doubts as unfounded. "You give them the opportunity and guidance, they'll surprise you."

There's been no looking back since.

Shawn proudly shares that just two weeks prior, he had the privilege of taking two Asli students to Mumbai, India, for a leadership camp. In a separate achievement, his group of students emerged victorious in a water rocket challenge at the zone level, earning the opportunity to represent their school at the district level.

"They're just as capable as any other student," he asserts.



Shawn and his Teach for Malaysia collaborators. From left, Nurhamimi Atirah, Febryani Fallensia and Siti Noor Shafiqah.

Shawn expresses deep gratitude to Johari and his TFM colleagues — Siti Noor Shafiqah, Febryani Fallensia and Nurhamimi Atirah — for their steadfast support and shared commitment to enhancing the children's education. "I couldn't have made any progress with the students without their help," he says candidly.

Living at the school and fulfilling a dual role as teacher and guardian of the boarding house there, he shares that he intends to carry on doing what he does best — teaching with a lot of heart and humour.

In this remote outpost teeming with wildlife and surrounded by nature, eager-eyed students dare to dream big dreams, fuelled by ambitions stretching far beyond their village borders.

This transformation is deeply rooted in the dedication of a young educator who has found his true purpose in teaching, touching the lives of his students and guiding them towards a future filled with promise and hope.