NEW STRAITS TIMES

14 tries at SPM BM over 7 years — and he's now an award-winning teacher! [WATCH]

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

https://youtu.be/dhex6rSLUUY

YOU'VE got to hand it to Kathiresan Moorthy — his dedication is undeniable. Here's a man willing to travel all the way from Kuala Lipis, Pahang, just to make it to our morning interview. And he doesn't merely show up; he's early, waiting patiently. Meanwhile, I'm running 10 minutes late. It's unforgivable, really, given that he's covered over 100 kilometres — and still managed to beat me to it.

He strolls into the café with a knapsack slung casually over his shoulder, a wide smile lighting up his face. Kathiresan, or simply Kathi — or *Cikgu* Kathi, as his students affectionately call him — has an unmistakable teacher vibe. With pressed slacks, a short-sleeved shirt, neatly cropped hair and a no-nonsense, attentive demeanour, he looks every bit the part, as if he's about to give me a lesson.

Just over a week ago, I contacted Kathi, and he readily agreed to an interview. Currently pursuing a doctorate in sports science at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in Tanjung Malim, he was recently named one of the five finalists in Pemimpin GSL's 2023 Malaysia Teacher Prize, which honours exceptional educators.



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Ever the meticulous teacher, he wasn't about to leave things to chance.

"Should we have a quick run-through over Google Meet?" he suggested. "What should I wear?" he asked, before pressing further: "Any documents to prepare?"

I assured him that it'd be an informal chat, nothing more than an easy-going meet-up.

Despite my reassurances, he clearly isn't accustomed to approaching anything unprepared. He still looks slightly uneasy as he arrives, promptly taking out a sheaf of papers and uncapping his pen, ready to take notes at a moment's notice.

But preparation is something he's always taken seriously. The award-winning teacher first made headlines when it was reported that he'd sat for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) Bahasa Malaysia (BM) paper seven times as a student.

"Not seven times," he corrects me, before adding with a faint smile: "It took me seven years, and with the exams held twice a year, I ended up sitting for the paper 14 times!"

It was on that final attempt that he finally secured a 4B.

DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS



With his beloved mother.

"It wasn't easy," he reflects quietly. Life was already tough for his mother, who was left to raise five children on her own. Kathi, the fourth in the family, pauses, lost in thought.

"We were struggling," he confides, finally breaking the silence, recounting how his siblings were sent to stay with an uncle while he insisted on staying by his mother's side.

The young boy watched her toil relentlessly, from dawn till dusk, taking on any job she could find — cooking, cleaning, washing dishes and even doing laundry.

"She worked in *tujuh kedai* (seven shops), doing everything she could to keep us afloat," he adds.

Eventually, his mother opened a modest food stall, and it was in that cramped space that he learned to cook from a young age. By age 13, he was helping his mother daily at the stall.

"Money was tight," he says simply, adding: "My relatives helped when they could, and we received a stipend from the Welfare Department."

Helping his mother came at the cost of his education. "*Saya tak nampak hala tuju saya* (I couldn't see my direction in life)," Kathi admits. "I had plenty of dreams. But with money problems, achieving anything felt almost impossible."

But the financial strain wasn't the only hurdle.

After attending a Tamil school in his early years, Kathi transitioned to a Kebangsaan school, where he struggled to keep up, especially with BM. "It was a huge leap," he recalls. As an introvert, asking for help felt intimidating. "I mostly kept to myself and tried to manage," he admits softly.

It was his teachers who became his lifeline during those turbulent school years. "They truly cared for me," he recalls, voice softening. "They'd ask about my mother and brothers, and sometimes even bought me food."

Their kindness wasn't lost on him. It left a lasting impact, especially one teacher: *Cikgu* Zawahir, his maths teacher. She wasn't just a teacher but a steady presence in his life. Alongside offering financial help when she could, she never stopped pushing him to persevere. "Don't be lazy," she'd urge gently. "You'll regret it when you're older."

With a hint of emotion in his voice, he muses: "I think these teachers inspired me to want to become a teacher myself. To this day, I still keep in touch with *Cikgu* Zawahir."

Still, Kathi only managed a 7D for his BM paper in the SPM. "I really regretted not focusing on my studies when I had the chance," he confesses. But he refused to let his setbacks define him.

"I realised that BM was crucial if I wanted to continue my studies," he explains, adding: "I told myself that I wanted more for my future, that I had to chase my dreams. So, I made the decision to re-sit for the paper."



The determined teacher made 14 attempts to earn a credit in his Bahasa Malaysia SPM exam.

This would prove to be a long journey of seven years and 14 attempts to at least get a credit for the paper. He shakes his head bemusedly. "It was frustrating, of course," he confides. In the meantime, he continued to help his mother at her food stall and eventually applied for a tender to open a stall at the Institute Pendidikan Guru Kampus Tengku Ampuan Afzan (IPG) in Kuala Lipis.

"I ended up running a food stall there, while my mother managed her original stall in town."

At 20, Kathi managed to get his driver's licence, and he and his mother began saving diligently, putting aside RM30 a day. After six months of scrimping and saving, they finally had enough to buy a Perodua Kancil.

By the time he was 22, life began to improve. They now had a car and two food stalls. At the campus, he became acquainted with many young teachers who were studying there right after completing Form 5. "I thought they were very clever and it motivated me to keep trying to pass my paper," he says wistfully.

Despite his determination, each attempt ended the same way: a 7D. Yet his mother never lost faith. She urged him to keep trying, insisting she'd cover the RM32 exam fees as long as he didn't give up. "You can change your life," she'd remind him.

By 2009, Kathi reached a turning point. He told himself that if he didn't get the credit he needed this time, he'd have to accept his fate as a *pengusaha gerai makan* (food stall operator). Then, with a wide grin, he shares: "Thankfully, on my 14th try, with God's help, I succeeded and scored 4B!"

REMOTE OUTPOST



Kathi (centre) during his degree studies at IPG Raja Melewar in Seremban.

The following year, Kathi handed over his food business to his brother and applied for a temporary teaching position. His first posting was in Benta, where he taught for two and a half years.

"What did you teach?" I ask, unable to resist. With a hearty laugh, he replies drolly: "Aside from Physical Education? Bahasa Malaysia!" We both burst into laughter at the irony.

When his contract expired, Kathi, along with many other temporary teachers, was given the chance to pursue a degree. He was sent to IPG Raja Melewar in Seremban to further his education. Kathi excelled there, graduating with first-class honours and earning two awards along the way.

Six months after graduating, Kathi was posted to SK Kampung Aur, a remote Orang Asli school far from the nearest town. It was a true baptism of fire; he grappled with low attendance, poor literacy, hygiene issues and a lack of interest in learning.

Conditions outside the classroom were equally harsh. Kathi's quarters were infested with termites, snakes and large rats. "Every night, I'd tie my jeans with rubber bands and plug cotton wool in my ears to keep the termites out!" he laughs.

Adding, he elaborates: "I wasn't exactly brave, but maybe God was teaching me courage." After 10 tough months in those deplorable wooden quarters, he finally moved 40km to the nearest town, opting for a daily commute instead.



With his Orang Asli students from SK Kampung Aur, who grew fond of him.

Despite the odds, Kathi was determined to make a difference. He rolled up his sleeves — literally — bathing the students himself and teaching them basic hygiene. Realising that conventional methods weren't working, he tapped into the children's love for games and nature, weaving them into his lessons. It was a bold move, but it sparked real change.

In a short span of time, school attendance rose from 69 per cent to 95.7 per cent. Students' skills also improved as they learned through nature-inspired activities and fun games that Kathi devised. "From having the worst scores in Literacy and Numeracy screening (Linus), the school's performance improved drastically," he said proudly.

Kathi developed a kinesiology teaching aid called *Tapak Kaki Kathi* using recycled materials to help his students at SK Kampong Aur improve their netball footwork. As a result, eight of his students qualified for state competitions.

The creative teacher clinched a gold medal at the 2019 Kuantan Colloquium on Future Education at Widad University College Malaysia. That same year, he earned second place at the Pahang State Innovation & Public Service competition. That's not all; he also authored a training book on balance in netball, which was published in 2021.

AWARD-WINNING TEACHER



Kathi explaining his teaching methodology, which led him to win the Pahang state-level Innovative Teacher Award last year.

After two and a half years, Kathi was transferred to SK Bukit Ridan in Muadzam Shah. Here, he introduced the *8 Konstruk Kathi* teaching kit, blending reading with games across two phases: basic (constructs 1-4) and advanced (constructs 5-8).

Within six weeks, all students were reading their textbooks. His innovations earned him a gold at the 2022 National Innovation Competition and the National Innovative Teacher Award (Primary School Category) in 2023.



Kathi's unwavering dedication shines as he takes time to spruce up his classroom.

Kathi was posted to SJK Tamil Raub the following year, where he achieved the rare feat of helping Tamil-speaking students master BM. "It was my mandate and I wanted to give it my best," he says. "I knew how crucial the language is for their future and didn't want them to find it daunting. I understood their struggle — I was a Tamil school student too and had to sit for my paper 14 times!"

After 10 months, Kathi moved to SK Mahmud in Raub. His innovative methods not only transformed his classroom, but also inspired colleagues to rethink their teaching. He developed a special programme for students with disabilities and those on the spectrum. Kathi taught there until October last year. "I did what I could and made a difference," he reflects quietly.

Though currently on study leave to pursue his doctorate, the 39-year-old's passion for teaching remains strong. He continues to support students struggling with their SPM exams, offering extra lessons or a listening ear.

"I know what it's like," he admits, adding: "I lost seven years of my life and I want to be there for them, so they don't have to face the same hurdles alone."



Kathi with some of the students he has supported — (From left) Nagulan Ganesan, Saranya Ganesan, Yogakrishnan Palaniyandi, Piraven Kumar Ravi and Ananthan Sanmugam.

The testimonials are nothing short of inspiring. Students who once came to Kathi feeling hopeless have gone on to achieve milestones they never thought possible. Kathi shares their stories with unmistakable pride, his eyes lighting up as he writes down their names on the papers before him — Nagulan, Saranya, Yoga, Piravin and Ananthan.

"These are just some of my success stories," he says emotionally. Most of them had been with him since Year 5, and Kathi's guidance hadn't only improved their grades, but also transformed their confidence. "They came to me unsure, feeling defeated. Now, they're breaking barriers and chasing dreams," he enthuses.

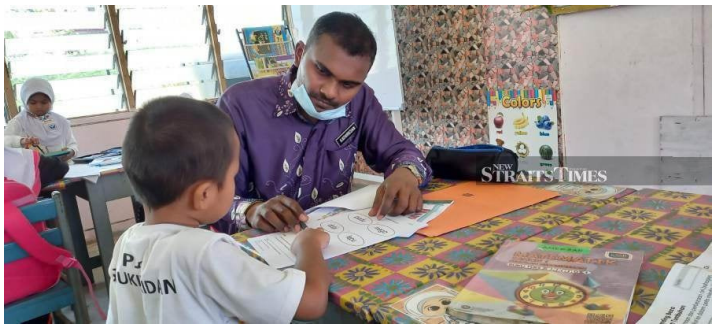
Time is ticking and thunder rumbles in the distance outside. It's time for Kathi to begin his long journey back to Kuala Lipis. "Thank you, Elena," he says, extending a warm handshake. I pause, unsure of who should be thanking whom.

He's come a long way — not just on this trip, but in life. Armed with determination and a desire to make a difference, he's transformed countless students' lives and taught me something profound.

It's not just about teaching or grades; it's about fighting for every student, seeing potential where others see limits, and persisting when the path seems impossible. As he walks away, I realise the impact of one dedicated teacher extends far beyond the classroom, reaching even those who never expected to learn from him.

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Keywords:



Kathiresan Moorthy has a passion for teaching.