

The humble roots of the nature school

Tunas Mulia Nature School was established because of the founder's concern for child scavengers in Sumur Batu and Bantargebang disposal area (TPA) in Bekasi, West Java. Hundreds of child scavengers who live in temporary huts in that area have dropped out of school.

The founder of the Nature School, Nadam Dwi Subekti, 44 years old, found it difficult in the beginning to teach child scavengers or make their parents understand the importance of school. When he opened the school on October 13, 2006, no one attended. "It seemed like they were not convinced," he said.

Every day, Nadam traveled around visiting their huts, knocking on their doors and inviting their children to be students in the Nature School. However, the community was not interested in sending their children to school. The parents preferred them to keep collecting trash to earn money.

Nadam didn't lose hope. He came up with an idea of giving away basic commodities such as rice, cooking oil and instant noodles valued Rp.50,000 to parents who were willing to let their children attend the Nature School. "The parents considered this incentive as compensation for their child's half day absence from work," he said.

As a result, 50 child scavengers registered for his first class, aged between 7 and 15 years old. Nadam provided them with school supplies such as books, pens, pencils, and school bags to boost their spirit to study.

Since the school didn't have a permanent building, the classes were moved from one hut to another. At first, they weren't taught standard subjects like Indonesian language or math, but instead they were taught how to live a clean and healthy life including the importance of washing hands using soap, changing clothes after contact with trash, and taking showers using soap.

At first, he said, nearly all the students came to school without shoes. They were sweaty, smelly and brought in flies. Some even came without shirts on, and only wore shorts. "In the beginning, I taught them how to clean themselves from the simplest step: how to wash their hands."

Nadam has a simple rule for the students. They may come to school only if they have taken a shower and wear clothes, although there is no school uniform. He is flexible on slippers and shoes.

Unfortunately, this rule was still difficult for child scavengers to follow. It was challenging to change their habits because they deal with trash everyday, and it was difficult for them to remove smells from their clothing and bodies. "It took nearly a year to change their hygiene habits."

From there, he and his wife, Widiyanti, 43 years old, slowly developed the Nature School for child scavengers. He participated in a course on Nature School education held in Bojongkulur, Vila Nusa Indah II, Bekasi, to get more information on how to manage a Nature School for child scavengers.

After a month-long course, Nadam started to prepare a Nature School concept while consulting with practitioners. After the concept was ready, he looked for permanent donors to establish a school for child scavengers. Several foundations donated funds to establish the school; one of them is Portal Infaq Foundation who gives some Rp.4.6 million per month.

Two years after the establishment of the school, Nadam constructed a semi-permanent building on rented land. By the time more students enrolled and more donors joined, the Nature School moved to a 4,200 square meter piece of land at Jalan Pangkalan 2, RT 02/RW 04, Sumurbatu village. In this new area, Nadam built eight classrooms, bathrooms, an office, a small mosque, and a mini garden and rabbit farm as an additional skill-building opportunity for child scavengers.

Children are grouped by age for their respective grade. For example, 7 to 8 year old children are 1st graders, and so on. When there are children above 10 years old who cannot read and write, they must enter elementary level grades first. To maintain high standards, the Nature School uses package A and package B national education programs so that the local education office in Bekasi recognizes the graduates.

Today, the school has 15 teachers. Their salaries are varied, ranging between Rp.200,000 to Rp.450,000 per month. This small income does not provide a great incentive for teachers to come share their knowledge with child scavengers, but some enjoy the work anyway. Ms. Ita, for example, said that she really enjoys being around the children. "In terms of salary, it is certainly not enough to fulfill my needs, but here at least I can share with others," she explained.

Recently, the school received visitors from Jakarta State University (previously IKIP) and Jaya Raya University, also in Jakarta. They volunteered to come teach basic English to the children. The school facilities now provide enough space to accommodate the 230 students enrolled.

The Head of the Data and Planning Division of the local education office in Bekasi explained that the Nature School is categorized into a non-formal school because the final exams are not the same as that of formal schools.

For non-formal schools, the education office provides a budget of Rp.50.000 to Rp.100.000 per month per teacher/tutor. In addition, the local government is expected to provide training for head tutors at Nature Schools to improve teacher quality. Not all tutors in Nature Schools have teaching backgrounds, most of them come from different professions but have the same desire to help child scavengers.

Training for tutors is based on Government Regulation No.19 of 2005 concerning Standard Teachers or Educators, which requires teachers to have a bachelor degree or Certificate 4. "If they don't, then the local government of Bekasi should improve teacher quality through trainings and workshops," said Agus when asked for a confirmation over the phone.

Agus suggested that Tunas Mulia Nature School apply for a school administration permit so that they can receive funds from the government, such as the School Operational Fund (BOS). The education office, explained Agus, also provides access to improved school quality by conducting package exams for elementary school, package B for junior high school and package C for senior high school students.

This article is the first article on child scavengers in West Bekasi, West Java from a series of two in-depth articles written by Hamludin of TEMPO media group and published by tempo.co and Koran TEMPO on 6 and 7 November, respectively. The article is part of the ILO's media fellowship programme on child labour and education, jointly conducted in collaboration with the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Jakarta and six selected leading, national mass media. The media fellowship programme was part of the campaign conducted by the ILO through its Combating Child Labour through Education Project, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.