Making a difference

It is altruism in a pure form. Fifty of the nation’s youngest and brightest leave their comfy well-paying jobs to dedicate two years of their lives to teach children in several of the country’s ‘high need’ schools. And the organisation that’s making this happen?

Teach For Malaysia. AZILEA BADRI writes.
FOR Ratnadewi Lim, the need to do something more meaningful in life led her to become a "Teach For Malaysia" Fellow. An international business management graduate from the University of Nottingham (Malaysia), Ratna worked with a retail merchandising company for two and a half years before making the switch to teaching. For the 28-year-old, the passion to teach was discovered purely by chance, when she was transferred to the recruitment and training department.

"Before that I had always thought that I didn’t have the patience to teach – kids especially. So being in that (training) role for about a year or so, I felt the need to do something more meaningful. I felt that I needed to do something that gave me personal satisfaction, because at 26 or 27, I was still a little lost. I was working but I wasn’t very happy, it wasn’t very fulfilling. Then I came across TFM."

She experienced an “A-ha!” moment when reading newsfeeds about the organisation on Facebook. For Ratna, the postings sounded a note and moved her to action.

"The mission of TFM resonates with what I’ve always believed in. Ever since I was young, I’ve always felt that a lot of social ills, a lot of problems that we’re facing, are caused by a lack of education. And to me education is not just about teaching Mathematics, English and Science. It’s holistic and includes moral and good values,” says the English teacher at SMK Segambut in Kuala Lumpur.

"I feel that it’s a good opportunity for me to teach children that it doesn’t matter what race or religion a person is, you have to respect each other. You have to be able to accept each other’s differences and embrace each other.

"The school may not in the best physical condition but with the right mindset, and when the heart is open, you can create any sort of learning environment, as long as the teacher is there to create that environment. It’s a chance for me to bring positive change to a number of people; even if it’s just one or two people, it’s fine. That was when I applied to join TFM, and I got in and the rest is history."

Like the rest of the fellows interviewed, Ratna only began teaching in January, so it’s still early days. And it has been a challenge thus far. A teacher’s job is hardly an easy one, says Ratna. It’s a 24-hour vocation.

"People can say that being a teacher is easy, only a half-day at work. They don’t know how difficult it is until they themselves become a teacher. It’s challenging in terms of handling the students, in terms of workload – we constantly think of work.

"When you go home you have to prepare the lesson plan for the next day, you have to mark books, prepare a lot of materials for your lessons; it’s a 24-hour job. You have to make calls to the parents, make house visits, these are our strategies to invest in the students. Like it or not, we have to take the extra step to make sure that the students are invested."

Despite the challenges, Ratna is determined to succeed and be there for the children. And, she says, she’s here to stay.

"As teachers, we have to be the people guiding them because some of them don’t have enough guidance at home. Some are used to being neglected, are used to people thinking that they won’t amount to anything. To get them out of that mindset is very challenging. So they need to see that we are here for real, we’re not just here to say things and not do anything."

Because she teaches the “last” two classes (Form One and Form Two), there are students who are disruptive in class. But, says Ratna, the answer is in the approach.

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Once, together with another TFM fellow who’s also a colleague, she paid a visit to the home of one particularly disruptive student and spoke to his parents. They actually brought good news to the parents.

"We told them their son had a lot of potential, be just needed to focus his energy on his lessons and homework. We could see an immediate change. The following day, the kid came to class with his books and he paid attention. He knew that we were serious. He began to understand the seriousness of education. He became less disruptive."

"Does she ever feel like she made a mistake?"

"Many, many times! But at the end of the day, I would sit down, think and ask myself why I even did this in the first place. It was obvious that we had touched a nerve, because Ratna began to tear up as she spoke.

"When I think of the kids, it’s really sad. If I give up, it means that I am the same as those who don’t care. So I use that as motivation. We don’t realise how lucky we are. How 50 sen makes a lot of difference, how driving a car is such a luxury."

"I have students who have never been in a car before. My friend Jacinthia (a fellow), once drove a student home and the student was in awe. My colleague asked her if she had ever been in a car before and she replied, ‘Persah Dilan, sekai!’ (Yes teacher, once).

"We don’t realise that these kids have to take the bus, walk to school, in the heat, the rain. It’s crazy how lucky and privileged we are, yet we don’t realise it. Even though it’s difficult now, it’s going to be worthwhile because these kids need to know that we believe in them."

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The classroom is noisy with students engrossed in a debate on mathematical reasoning. Teacher Kugahnaesan Manogaran is explaining the connection between the compound words in “Mathematics” before conducting a quiz on the subject. Many of the students have raised their hands.

“Aqilah looks great and Cikgu Kugahnaesan’s gesture at the student with his marker to ‘behave’, but does so with a smile, and good-naturedly reminding him, ‘Don’t involve me in this discussion, please.’

“They are fairly good students and excellent too. A few of them need extra attention but the rest are high-achievers,” he adds, as we sit down for a chat. It is a Friday and the school is always with activities. Other classes are going into session and teachers are briskly walking to their classrooms.

Kugahnaesan – Cikgu Kugahnaesan’s name to his students – shares that there have been many times when he felt challenged, walking to their classrooms.

“Such situations can be stressful and they occur with little or no warning. I usually take a step back when that happens and try not let a bad day or a particularly frustrating situation get the better of me,” says the studious-looking, spectacled young man.

Teachers are responsible for creating a classroom culture that fosters respect and civility, he believes. Every part of the instruction process from the syllabus to the grading should reflect this commitment. “I stress the importance of being polite and respectful in order for these to be reciprocated,” he adds.

Kugahnaesan started teaching at the school in January. He teaches Form 4 Mathematics and was also appointed the discipline teacher by the headmistress.

He found out about the Teach for Malaysia programme from a friend when he was pursuing his Bachelor’s Degree in Economics at University College London (UCL) in Britain last year. He decided to apply and a couple of days later, he received a call from TFM headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

“It so happened that four of TFM’s representatives were travelling to London and during the visit, I was interviewed by them. Not long after, I was accepted in the programme,” says the 24-year-old who signed up for a two-year tenure under TFM.

Returning to Malaysia, Kugahnaesan attended an eight-week intensive teaching course at Institute Aminuddin Baki in Genting Highlands, Pahang, as part of the preparations for participating in the programme.

The course also involved a probationary stint called “Kem Skolah” where participants (or fellows as they are known) are provided firsthand teaching experience during the school holidays. Kugahnaesan was sent to Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Ampang Pecah in Kuala Kubu Baru, Selangor.

The TFM experience has thus far been enriching and invaluable, he says. He teaches three classes, two of which are known to be academically weak students who require extra attention.

“I believe lack of discipline is the root cause of poor academic performance. We are caught in an ecosystem where teachers focus on certain aspects of what has been accepted as constituting a good student to the exclusion of developing the student holistically. I try to assist some of my students by doing one-on-one sessions. Bad to say, there is a shortage of teachers in most schools and this approach can’t be adopted comprehensively,” he says, adding that the ideal scenario is to have three teachers to a class, for a personalized approach to teaching.

“I start with viewing intelligence as a multi-faceted and unique attribute in each child. I always tell my students to develop the unique ways in which they’re going to thrive in the world,” adds Kugahnaesan.

Another of his observations is that students from the academically-challenged classes are usually conforming and timid, while showing a lack of confidence.

“When you have 40-odd pupils in a class with different characters and personalities, it is not easy. In one class, I have students who are highly competitive while in another, a mixed bunch. This has to be one of the biggest challenges faced by a teacher – to meet the different needs.”

Kugahnaesan addresses the students’ needs through several approaches that involve simulations and interaction. He is happy that the methods he applies have, in just a few months, helped raised his students’ assessment results.

“I have a student who previously gave ‘zero’ as the answer to my question of ‘0 + 4’. It saddened me. But she is keen to learn. I engaged her in all my class activities and paid more attention to her. When I highlighted my concern to the headmistress, she asked me to teach the very basics of mathematics to the students. Yes, it’s a narrowing of the syllabus actually. Yet it has proven effective. From getting Ds, that particular student has improved and has started getting an A in Mathematics,” he says, beaming.

There are good and bad days, of course. “When a student disrupts my lesson, I will pull out my mobile phone and threaten to call the parents. It has worked several times for me. Luckily, the students are scared of their parents,” he says, adding that he calls a good class “a dessert class” because fulfilment tastes sweet.

He also buys his students gifts as a show of appreciation and reward, particularly when they do well in examinations. “When you deal with youngsters, these little gestures take you a long way. They love it,” he says.

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LUTFI AFIQ ROSLI @ SMK PUCHONG, SELANGOR

BY HAFIDAH SAMAT

UTFI Afiq Rosli, a marine biologist by training, remembers waking up on his first day for school and asking himself if teaching was really the vocation for him. Several months and many classrooms later at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Puchong, he says he hasn’t regretted his decision.

“I’m pursuing a Masters programme in Marine Biology at a local university. I’ve plans to become a lecturer in the future,” says the 24-year-old with a smile.
Under the TFM programme, Lutfi chose to teach Science and quickly realised that teaching involves interacting with people which led him to developing his classrooms into communities. “I ended up reaching out to not only my students but also their parents.”

Meeting for a tea-to-a-tea in Petaling Jaya, Lutfi confides that he’s had a tough day in school. This is partly because once school ends, his role as a disciplinary teacher begins. He takes a hands-on approach and that, a day, with the parents of one of his students moved him very much. “The mother told me that her husband traballed outstation regularly and is unable to pay more attention to the child. She was in tears,” discloses Lutfi, who stresses the importance of parental involvement in the growth of their children.

Despite the challenges, Lutfi finds teaching gratifying. He loves helping students, especially those having problems with their studies and seeing their confidence improve.

“Kugahnaesen and I teach the same classes. We exchange notes about the students. Some of the students come from poor families and they work part-time to support their families. One of our students works at a burger stall and he finishes work at 3am daily. He was always falling asleep during my class and when I asked him about it, he confessed to his late hours.

“Since then, I pay extra attention to him. I’d make sure that his school work is up-to-date. Thank God, his academic performance has improved,” says Lutfi.

The Johor Baru-born young man says he tends to sleep worse after getting a simple ‘thank you, Sir’ from his students. “At times it gets crazy, teaching’s been a life-changing thing for me in a good way for the most part. It’s been fun, challenging, it’s been dull and dry, kind of the whole gamut,” he admits.

Lutfi feels gratified for having a chance to educate young Malaysians, which is especially rewarding when students are really eager to learn. He was a researcher before he stumbled upon the TFM programme last year. He underwent a series of rigorous tests before being called in for the final selection process. His experience in the marine biology field helps. “My science background comes in handy as I know how to engage my students in interactive work in the classroom,” says the graduate of Universiti Malaysia Terengganu.

“I realise that the primary driving goal seems to be getting good test scores. But I tell my students to be passionate about everything and not just focus on the UPSR (Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah) examination and Form One classes, I have students scoring all E’s in the UPSR (Ujian Pemilihan Sekolah Rendah) examination and I would need some time to figure out how to teach them. This is where the other major challenges come into picture. Since the predominantly Chinese students don’t speak Malay or English in their daily lives, language barriers exist during the teaching and learning process. I teach History and the subject deals a lot with sophisticated Malay terms. If they have problems recognizing letters and spelling words, how am I supposed to plant a new sophisticated Malay term in their memories?”

Creativity, reckons Lutfi, is one of the key aspects of teaching. At all levels, he strives to promote creative problem-solving and critical thinking skills which prompt students to collaborate and communicate effectively.

“I believe that students need to develop a sense of independence, resilience, perseverance and adaptability for positive personal growth. This helps them succeed in school and prepare for life in an increasingly complex society,” says Lutfi.

That he is an advocate of personal development comes as no surprise. Lutfi’s Saturdays are spent attending an 18-month post-graduate Diploma in Education programme at Institute Aminuddin Baki in Genting Highlands, as a prerequisite to the teaching certification under TFM.

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