

## **A SCHOOL THAT CELEBRATES THE MIND AND HEART**

**By Ibu Kat**

There's been a lot of hand-wringing in the Jakarta Post lately about the dismal state of Indonesia's schools and the high failure rate of children taking exams. But there are a few shafts of light in the darkness. One of the brightest shines from the village of Mas, just south of Ubud.

Sekolah Bali Hati, an elementary school established to provide a good education for children who couldn't afford to attend school, consistently produces Bali's top scholars. The first class to take the Sixth Grade National Graduation Examination in 2006 ranked first in Ubud (over 80 schools) and seventh in Gianyar. This year, the students of Bali Hati school ranked first in the whole of Bali.

What was going on here? Intrigued, I visited the little school to see for myself why these poor farmer's kids are surging ahead of their more privileged age group.

From the first moment of my arrival, I couldn't help comparing Bali Hati School to the elementary school next to my house in Ubud. Instead of rows of desks, about 20 children in each class sit around the teacher on the floor, share books or work independently on projects. The work tables are gaily painted and each room has corners dedicated to science, math and other subjects. Instead of a bare room, there are shelves spilling over with books, globes and colourful teaching aids. The walls are bright with posters, diagrams and maps. A full-sized human skeleton dangles in one corner. Instead of sitting in rows chanting lines learned by rote, these kids move around freely and are fully engaged with the project at hand, the teachers and each other. The kids are bright, confident and curious. There's an energy in these classrooms that's hard to describe.

The school started with a single kindergarten class in 1999, with a new class being added each year as the children grew older. Bali Hati School now offers a playgroup, two kindergartens and elementary grades one through six. The initial school was built by the Bali Hati Foundation but as it continued to grow, it became evident that more class rooms would be needed to create a full elementary school. Nancy Dobbs, a retired American who taught at bicultural schools in Latin America, very generously built a new wing which includes a library and general meeting room for the school, an office and more classrooms. Nancy, who lives part of the year in Ubud, also sponsors many of the children attending the school.

Each class is limited in size to 22 students and all classes have two teachers. The school day is longer than is usual in Bali, running from 8 to 2:30. Every class is bright, spotless and full of interesting things to see and do. The spacious library is also home to a bank of computers, which the children start learning to use in first grade. Every child sits down to a cooked lunch and no junk food is sold at the school. There wasn't a scrap of rubbish to be seen anywhere. There are many receptacles for recycling paper and plastic -- these children learn about waste management from kindergarten. This was indeed a school after my own heart.

While following the government curriculum, the subjects are taught using a modified Montessori's Steiner method. The school enriches its child-centered interactive learning model with class projects, Balinese dancing, music, public speaking, cooking, arts and crafts, field trips and other extra-curricular activities. The preschool program is completely bilingual and the English/Indonesian program is being phased into all classes this month at the request of the parents. The entire school will be fully bilingual by 2010.

The top of the bookcase in the school office is crowded with academic awards. The Principal, Pak Dadi Johandi, beams with pride when pointing them out. "I love this school. It's like my home," he smiles. He points out that the school almost always ranks among the top three in Gianyar for English, math, science, painting and spelling during educational competitions. "We're constantly striving to improve. Teachers from other schools often come to observe how we do things here." He explains that besides ensuring that the children have a strong grasp of academic subjects, the teachers build on and support each child's strengths in other areas.

"My goal was to create the best school in Bali," Nancy explains. "Now we've achieved that. But we're concerned about continuity for these children. Our Grade Six graduates get top marks and

are always accepted into Bali's best government high schools, but ideally we'd like to be able to continue to offer an outstanding education through high school. The students can then go on to universities all over the world. So the next step is to raise money to build a secondary school." A donor has committed to purchasing the land, and fundraising is now underway to cover building costs. Major donors will be given naming rights to buildings and sports facilities.

It's hard not to be inspired by what's going on at Bali Hati School. This little center of excellence offers an exceptional opportunity for Balinese children to receive a level of education usually only available at much more expensive schools. The school in the rice fields is a place of learning that celebrates not only the mind but the heart as well.

Initially created for poor children, it now opens its doors to all. At this point 83% of the children are attending the school on scholarships according to their financial needs. But in order to be sustainable Bali Hati School needs more full-paying students to help subsidize the others. The cost of a two-semester year is Rp 7.6 million and there are currently a few spaces in most classes. To enquire, please contact Pak Dadi at [balihatischool@balihati.org](mailto:balihatischool@balihati.org) or call 742 1865.

The school needs English-speaking volunteers so the children can hear native speakers with different accents. Please call Pak Dadi if you might be interested in spending a few hours a week speaking with the children at this remarkable school.

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