

***Indonesia Mengajar* Volunteers Take Pride in Lending a Hand**

Daniel Chrisendo | September 30, 2012

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One day in geography class I hung a map of Indonesia on the blackboard and asked my sixth grade class, “Where is Lampung? Please put a pin on the island!”

Surprisingly, all 11 kids placed the pin on Java instead of Sumatra — they didn’t know where in the world they were standing.



Indonesia Mengajar (Indonesia Teaches) is a volunteer-based educational program in which the country's top graduates teach in rural areas. (AFP Photo)

These were students at a rural primary school in West Tulang Bawang, Lampung. Their grandparents were transmigrants from Java, who were told to make a living as farmers in the middle of the jungle.

To families like these, Lampung is just a state. They live in 100 percent Javanese neighborhoods, Javanese in culture and habits to the core.

Not many of the children here go to school, and only a few make it to middle school. The community’s apathy toward education, the difficult roads to school, the lack of electricity and inadequately trained teachers mean that the quality of education here is low. I begin to wonder if the central government pays any attention to communities like these.

Despite their inability to understand exactly where they are, the kids identify themselves as Indonesians and understand what it means to be Indonesian.

Dewi, a 10-year-old student, understands that being an Indonesian is about being a respectful person in a society of diverse people. Being an Indonesian means taking care of our environment and saving water for those who might be suffering a drought. It means teaching the poor and giving to the hungry.

Davit, a 9-year-old in the class, is quick to point out the importance of nationalism.

“Being Indonesian means attending the flag-raising ceremony every Monday and singing our national anthem, ‘Indonesia Raya’ with a proud and loud voice,” Davit said. “We must become heroes by studying hard and having aspirations for Indonesia.”

Another student, 9-year-old Ega, believes that being Indonesian is about producing food and feeding the world. Even at his tender age, he knows his country is one of the world's biggest food producers.

"I love working in the field," Ega said. "It produces different types of food. I love to see when the trucks come to collect the rice, coffee and gum. But my favorite food is the snake fruit."

Ten-year-old Lifa believes that being an Indonesian means being ready to serve the country.

"We are a nation who honors other people," she said. "We follow the rules, we teach others to read and write, we heal those who are sick and we have faith in God."

Lifa feels happy and grateful that Indonesia is now an independent country, and imagined how heartbroken everyone would have been to see our flag torn before independence.

As their teacher, I'm proud to be Indonesian. I'm proud to live in the largest archipelago and maritime country in the world. I'm proud to live among the fourth largest population in the world, with the most diverse people and culture, with more than 740 tribes, speaking more than 580 languages. I'm proud to live in a beautiful country with the richest biodiversity in the land and water, with the richest coral reef in the world, the largest mangrove forest, the only habitat where the Komodo dragon still lives and the only place where the largest flower, the *Rafflesia arnoldii*, grows.

For me, being an Indonesian teacher means helping my students understand how lucky they are to live in this prosperous country. How high they should hold their head and how grateful they should feel to be Indonesian. Being a teacher means freeing them from illiteracy, a lack of confidence and condescension. I'm proud to be able to ensure they know about the greatness of their country, where they live, and help them become globally competitive adults who can say, "I am proud to be Indonesian."

Recently, one of my students, an 11-year-old boy named Kevin, wrote: "My journey to school is really hard, and the sun is hot and sometimes it stings my skin. But I have to go to school. I have to tell the world that my country is No. 1."

Daniel Chrisendo is an Indonesia Mengajar volunteer serving in West Tulang Bawang, Lampung.

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