Children learning while playing in the village school yard, Sarmi, Papua.

SONNY HARDIONO FOR TEMPO

# Getting a Head Start

Learning through traditional games in village schools for infants under 5 has better prepared the children of Papua for entry to primary school. Jayapura lecturer in teaching, John Rahail, came up with the idea.

BESIDE a wooden building raised on stilts located near the beach, a group of infants sat gathered in a circle. All had their heads bent, busily manipulating lengths of string. They were forming letters, numbers and pictures of things they liked. This was going on in the village of Beneraf one mid-July clear, bright morning, to the background of a persistent coastal breeze.

At first glance this activity appeared to be just some kind of children's game. But once observed closely, it was evidently part of the village school activities—locals' term for the education of their very young children—in Beneraf, located in Sarmi regency, Papua. This school is the result of the work of John Rahail, 45, Director of the Institute for the Development and Empowerment of Papuan People (ICDp).

"I converted this traditional game into learning material, so they wouldn't feel strange when learning," John explained. To help them learn counting, for instance, he made use of a traditional hand string game (*twen'kam*), tops (*smin'kan*), and lemon spears (*lemon'bran*). This method has proven to make it easier for them to absorb what is being taught.

John, who has been active for 20 years in the NGO, sees that the source of the problems in education in Papua is almost uniform. Namely, the stigma that schooling is expensive and investment in it has no value—because it does take a long time to see the results.

At the end of 2007, John carried out a study into the education of children in five regencies in Papua—including Sarmi. From it he uncovered the fact that every existing program only involved the Papuans as recipients. The programs were also carried out using a perspective unfamiliar to local people and without any attempt to align them with local traditions and customs. John found another disturbing aspect: there was hardly ever any continuation of those programs run.

The snapshot of the status of education in Sarmi was equally grim. Children there were scared to go to school as they were unsure about how to ask questions. When at school, the children faced teachers who taught their lessons in hurried fashion. When at home, their parents were incapable of explaining whatever their child asked them about. "They could only teach them about growing food and fishing," said Martinus Waenok, 29, a teacher at Beneraf Village in Sarmi regency. As an example, he said, a year 1 class in primary school could consist of up to 40 children. But when it was time for the national examinations, only around 6 of those would turn up.

John then studied these cases. He finally arrived at the core issue: the children did not come well-prepared from home—nor did they have much self-confidence—to be ready to learn at primary school where there are various formal requirements. "Those who had been through a village school could al-

John Rahail

ready recognize letters and could count, so from that time (they started primary school—*Ed.*) it was easier for a teacher to teach them," commented Martinus Yowey, 50, Primary School Headmaster at the Catholic Education Foundation (YPK) in Beneraf.

The whole idea arose unexpectedly. John came up with a new approach. He thought of making himself a Sarmi villager by participating in every village meeting. Once he became close enough to all the villagers, he had the courage to suggest and then build a village school at the end of 2007.

Assisted by his friends from ICDp, this Merauke-born Papuan recruited and trained young men from Sarmi as teaching staff. "The initial funding came from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)" he revealed.

Using this initial funding, he succeeded in building three village schools in Betaf, Beneraf, and Yanma—all in Sarmi regency. The land and school buildings were provided by local communities. Their operating costs were taken from the village budgets. Classes were divided into two. That is, a starter class for 3-4-year-olds and an advanced class for 5-year-olds" said John. Teaching sessions only lasted two hours on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The curriculums were drawn up to suit the lifestyles of villagers in Sarmi's interior.

Each school had four teachers. They didn't get paid a salary. Be aware that these schools offered free education—so there was no money left for teachers' salaries. "I was bought a machine to grate coconuts with, and I get money from that," advised Martinus Waenok. After being trained by John, he claims he can now make use of whatever is available as a means to demonstrate something, "I once made a hand harmonium from bamboo to use when I was teaching the kids about the musical scale in songs," he recalled.

Waenok said that initially parents didn't believe in village schools. They considered that the teachers who also came from their village were not competent. After later seeing the village school's past students being active and diligent at school, as well as the change in their habits to washing their hands and praying before eating, though, more parents became attracted to enrolling their children.

We were able to find one example of this in the family of Pilemun Kantum, 40. She had no idea her decision to send her daughter to the village school could lead to the girl being able to read and count. "She is even very disciplined about taking a shower," she said, her eyes shining with pride.

John claims that parents now no longer feel awkward about listening to their children's stories concerning their school activities. If the child asks something, the parents are now relatively better able to answer—as the children's learning media are in the form of the very familiar traditional games they encounter every day.

Now, five years later, when *Tempo* again dropped by the three schools, evidently only the village school at Beneraf has continued to survive. When asked for his explanation of this, John revealed that the interests of villagers are becoming more and more heterogeneous, so it is now difficult to get a consensus—and this has led to the other schools becoming disused.

The village schools John built had the objective of growing the awareness of the need for education. That was why, when recruiting teaching staff, they were selected from the same village, so that everyone in that village would then have a sense of mutual ownership and would not feel they were simply the recipients of some externally generated activity.

How come the school at Beneraf has managed to survive? John Rahail, who also teaches at the Faculty of Education and Pedagogy of Cenderawasih University, considers villagers there are still united and have a common mission. They have themselves looked for ways to keep the school going, and at one village meeting even allocated funds to pay the school manager's honorarium.

Frederika Ulim, 30, a former teacher at the Yamna village school regrets that the school there is no longer operating. "The kids often come to my home and ask me when the school will reopen" she told us sadly. Frederika suggests that if the school does later reopen—as there are reports the local church may reopen it—its operating funds must be increased, the demonstration materials ought to be added to, and the curriculum needs to be updated. In short, "Villagers must be more involved," she said enthusiastically.

Even though two of the three schools he set up are now abandoned, John hopes the concept of the village school can continue to be developed throughout eastern Indonesia. He is fully convinced that the resulting character formation from an early age is really beneficial in preparing Papuan children to pursue a higher level of education. ■