

Bemo program promotes reading among school children

The BemoBaca mobile library program, launched at the SMPN 70 junior high school in Karet, Central Jakarta, on Friday, aims to encourage schoolchildren to further their interest in reading, while also providing benefits for bemo (three-wheeled minivan) drivers who participate.

Started by Enrico Halim, BemoBaca hopes to encourage the habit of reading among young people through an environmentally friendly version of the classic bemo vehicle, which will function as a mobile library and visit selected schools.

Bemo are traditionally long bodied, half-canopied, three-wheeled vehicles, which function as a form of public transportation in Jakarta. Due to the rise of other public vehicles, bemo are gradually being phased out and now operate in only a few areas.

BemoBaca is a follow-up from Enrico's BioBemo electric-powered bemo project, which began in 2010. So far, there is only one electric bemo in operation, which is the one being used as the mobile library. Enrico hopes to finish another electric bemo to formally carry passengers.

The program will therefore involve one bright orange bemo carrying a small variety of novels, magazines, cookbooks and educational non-fiction to schools in the Karet and Bendungan Hilir (BenHil) areas. Students will be able to borrow books from the bemo and return them when the vehicle returns to their school.

"Schools that want to participate in the program simply need to sign up for it, and they will get to choose their timeslot," Enrico told The Jakarta Post on Friday in the grounds of SMPN 70.

Enrico added that the program, which is funded by his own foundation, Aikon, and the Astra Honda Motor Foundation, benefits both students and bemo drivers.

"The program benefits bemo drivers, who earn an additional fee, while it benefits the students by developing their interest in reading," he said. According to Enrico, drivers could earn an extra Rp 75,000 (US\$6.5) a day by participating in the program.

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On weekdays, the program will travel to schools. Before the launch, Enrico actively visited schools to promote the program. On weekends, however, he plans to take the program to various kampung to further promote reading among young people.

Books for BemoBaca were donated by the community and by the program's sponsors, including design institution Grafisocial, paint company Pacific Paint and the design faculties of Tarumanegara University and Bina Nusantara University.

During the BemoBaca program's inaugural visit to SMPN 70, it attracted the attention of almost the entire student population. Students at the school had various reactions to the mobile library. Those who possessed an interest in reading enthusiastically welcomed the program.

"I've been into reading since primary school," said ninth-grade student Adinda. The 14-year-old's favorite books include fictional works such as the Harry Potter series.

Others said that it appealed to them in a different way. "I like reading. [Only] comic books though; I'm not really used to reading anything but those," said 14-year-old ninth-grader Jait, who is also known as Aban.

Some students however, were less enthusiastic about the aspect of literacy, but focused on other elements of the program.

"I don't really like to read. But the bemo looks pretty cool!" said 14-year-old student Zara, accompanied by her friend, Yasmin.

SMPN 70 principal Anik Khoiriyah showed enthusiasm for the program as she saw that it could help to encourage the habit of reading among her students.

"It's become a common perception that the children of today do not like to read. That is why this program is important for children because it promotes that interest," she told the Post on Friday.

Anik signed her school up for the program after Enrico visited one week ago to promote BemoBaca.

"Using bemo as the method of delivery also gives the children a new perspective on using old vehicles, in terms of preserving the vehicles' place in history and utilizing them in alternative ways," she added.

During the opening ceremony, representatives from six schools attended and expressed their interest in bringing the program to their schools. Enrico said that the program would run throughout the year. **(dyl)**

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