



Mae Sot Education Project

Newsletter

Late summer, 2026

<https://maesoteducation.ca>

For more information, contact us at maesoteducationproject@gmail.com

News from Mae Sot

Some glimpses of protracted migrant/refugee life in Mae Sot

Every day in the news, we hear of people all around the world who have been forcibly displaced from their homes and countries who are trying to survive in impossible situations. Many of these people live with trauma (or memories of it) and displacement for years with no end in sight. They find ways of adapting but know that realistically, they have little chance of experiencing what the UNHCR, in international refugee law parlance, refers to as a “durable solution”. We at MSEP try to stay up-to-date on developments in the migrant community.

Recently, one of our partners shared these observations with us:

Due to the ongoing civil war in Myanmar, which has continued to worsen since the military coup in 2021, many areas across the country have been severely affected by conflict. As the civil war has spread throughout Myanmar, many students have been unable to continue their education properly. As a result, many children and young people have come to migrant communities along the Thai–Myanmar border to continue their education.

In addition, the military junta has introduced policies that require many young people to join the armed forces. Many young people do not want to serve in the military, thus they have fled to Thailand and other neighboring countries to seek safety, refuge, and educational opportunities. While attempting to escape to neighboring countries, however, some have been arrested at checkpoints and forcibly sent back, where they may be required to join the military.

Migrant learning centers are also facing overcrowded classrooms and limited space, making it difficult to accept all children who wish to enroll. Most learning centers already have a large number of students, yet new students continue to apply for admission every year. We try our best to support and provide access to education for as many students as possible. However, due to limited classroom space and resources, we are unable to accept all applicants. Therefore, when we cannot accommodate additional students, we suggest that they enroll in other available learning centers.

Currently, there is also growing concern among migrants regarding the status of CI (Certificate of Identity) documents and Pink Cards (Thai government-issued foreigner identification cards that allow for longer stays) in Thailand. Many migrant workers and parents rely on these documents for their legal status and employment. Thai authorities and immigration officials regularly check the documentation and legal status of migrant people. Changes to these documentation systems could significantly affect many migrant families. This has created additional



So many children! Working parents trying to stay engaged



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concerns among migrant workers, people seeking refuge in Thailand, and some teachers who hold Pink Cards. The uncertainty surrounding their legal status and documentation has caused considerable worry within the migrant community.

While in Mae Sot, MSEP volunteers witness what daily life feels like to people, especially youth, caught in these situations. How do they adapt and manage? Here is some of what they have learned.....

From Malika:

While migrant life can be extremely peaceful and calm, for many students it's a rock and roll one. Students have to manage many aspects of their lives including school, work, family, and friends. Often they have to prioritize one at the expense of another. While students in Quebec may fall asleep in class because they are just kids and enjoy watching TV and playing video games till the late hours in the night, here in Mae Sot many fall asleep in class for an entirely different reason. Some of my students finish school and go straight home to work in their parents' shop or market booth. Nonetheless, It's incredible how resilient they are. They manage to finish their homework and show up at school the next day.

Being a migrant student also means showing up for your friends in and outside the class. Students are each other's families, especially for students living in dorms. They call each other siblings and share their clothes, knowledge, and inner thoughts. I have become close with a little girl in a school dormitory. She calls herself a little sister. She lives in the dormitory with her cousin who is more like a brother to her as she has lived in the same house as him in the refugee camps for the last 4 years. Now in the school dormitory, they have both extended their "families". They have made new brothers and sisters who show up for one another. Since this little girl is a heavy sleeper, her sisters often wake her up to make sure she is on time or sleep in the same bed as her to ease her worries. She is the light in the room when we are in big groups, and while she is much younger than her "brothers", she is always making sure they are well and tries to cheer them up when they are down. Migrant student life is all about managing these moments and creating a strong support system for yourself.

From Julianne:

Members of the migrant community always have to be cautious of the police. When I went to have my hair cut, the hair salon I went to in the Burmese market was a closed garage door. You have to know that the ladies standing in front of the door are hairdressers. Then you go up to them and explain that you want a haircut. They open the door to a real hair salon, filled with white lights to compensate for the lack of sunlight. Burmese people are not allowed to own hair salons or barber shops. To bypass this regulation, they learned to live in the shadows for their safety. On top of that, the Mae Sot police recently released a statement that they are on a mission to find 700 Burmese migrants who do not have legal documents. Thus the Burmese now have to be careful whenever they go outside. The sad reality is that many do not have legal documents, as a Myanmar passport (if obtainable) costs 50,000 Baht. They live in constant fear that one day the police will arrest them and force them back into Myanmar.



Laurie, Julianne, Malika and Rosemarie, representing MSEP in Mae Sot

From Rosemarie:

Every day in class, I ask my students, "How are you?" One day, I did not receive the expected "I'm fine" response. One of the most motivated and hardworking students in my class told me she was sad because her dad had called her before class. I asked her where he lived, and she explained that he was sick and struggling with alcoholism. I don't know where her mother is—I didn't feel that I should ask. I do know that she lives with her cousin's family, away from her siblings and that she lost her younger brother just a few months ago. Yet, she smiled and said, "Never mind, I'm fine." I still can't comprehend how she comes to class every day with such energy to learn English and participate in my activities when she has no real home to return to after school.

This week is my last week at Youth Connection Foundation. I decided to review hospitality and prepare my students for their final oral presentation. As we were reviewing greetings, customer expectations, and professional appearance, I came across a picture of a cat looking in the mirror and seeing a lion. The caption read: "What matters most is how you see yourself." So, I decided to teach a lesson on confidence. We played a fun truth-or-dare game about confidence, and I encouraged them to

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think about dreams, perseverance, and how we see ourselves. I could see in their eyes that they understood the importance of self-confidence, not only in the hospitality business but also in their daily lives. At the end of the class, I gave my students the opportunity to perform a traditional Karen dance in front of everyone, and I admired their confidence and pride in their culture.

From Laurie:

One of my students from the boarding house explained to me that before coming to Thailand, he was a soldier in the army in Myanmar. I could see in his eyes that there seemed to be so much more he wanted to say, but it brought back some bad memories. He told me that he really wanted to desert because he hated all the violence and just wanted to be a student. He believed he shouldn't have been forced at such a young age into the army. He explained that now, being in Thailand, he was a lot more optimistic for his future since he has access to education. Being in Mae Sot meant for him a safer life and better opportunities. For him to struggle a lot while speaking to me touched me since it really showed how hard it still was, 3 years later, to talk about his war experience.

One could argue that youth everywhere struggle with lost opportunities, family separations, parental deficiencies, even poverty, and indeed the migrant youth in Mae Sot are more safe and cared for than those in many other protracted refugee situations that we hear about in the news these days. However, the fact remains that for them, there are no clear pathways or opportunities that can offer them the assurance of a future beyond migrant/refugee life. As they approach adulthood, they face the likelihood of becoming outsiders in a marginalized work environment...unless advocates intervene and support their claim to the full range of rights as *full* human beings, members of the human community, that we in our secure corner of the world take for granted.

What our volunteers are learning

"...perhaps, in helping my students to open their eyes, I am learning to open my own."

"Do I look happy?"

By Malika Bédard, 2026 Volunteer

This is the first thing a grade 11 student in a migrant learning center asked me when we sat at a table in the school dormitory one evening. My answer was simple: "Yes, you look happy, but are you actually happy?" The student confirmed that while he may look happy, he was in fact not happy, like many of the fellow students who came to join us at the table as they heard us talking. I was confronted with their darker realities. These students are often far away from their families as the majority of the students' parents are still in Myanmar. While being far from family was not necessarily the main reason for their feelings of unhappiness, it was part of their pain. Some of the students went on to explain that while they might look happy, their outer look may not reflect their true inner feelings.

I thought of the expression "fake it till you make it". This is exactly what these children are doing. They do their best to find and emphasize happy moments as they smile so they won't worry others, since the contrary would be much more difficult.

Indeed, students are not taught to discuss their feelings openly; it isn't part of their culture. Nonetheless, while they try hard to seem happy to others, some tell me that doing so just makes them even more unhappy. A depressive state does not seem to be unknown to these children, yet it is rarely openly discussed as their lives are busy and filled by routines which do not allow much time to contemplate one's life. So while I did tell him he looked happy, the conversation that followed left me with a deeper understanding of the cultural norms that surround these children and what shapes their behaviors. Lastly, I realized that as foreign volunteers, we come to know which of our students have a harder time at home by watching some sleep on their desks, others coming with sad eyes, and some simply not coming back to school. We have to keep in mind that those who hide their struggles the best may also be suffering... even while projecting that they are happy.



Malika and boys – finding reasons to laugh...

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It's important to remember this nuance while I am interacting with the students. While not all of them are open to discussing their feelings, ensuring they have opportunities to do so, in more indirect or subtle ways, is significant. When I go to the school dormitory. I always make time to sit down with the students and give them the floor to talk and ask me any question they'd like to ask. Often the conversations revolve around their life before migrating to Mae Sot. They show me pictures of their homes on Google maps. They are proud to be Karen, Chin, Arakanese, and Burmese and enjoy the opportunities they have to share parts of their culture and show me their homes. These opportunities demonstrate that social bonds help strengthen their feelings of genuine happiness. While dormitories might not always feel like home for many of the students, the community of friends they have made in these safe spaces has in some ways become their families, their home.



...and reasons to learn

The Little Family I Have Come to Know

By Julianne Chartier, 2026 Volunteer

The first time I biked to Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Center to sleep over with boarding students, I had in mind a large group of youth that I would have to entertain and supervise. However, when I arrived at the school, everything was quiet. As I entered the grounds, eager to understand the calm, the 40 students I had expected



Dormitory room at Hsa Mu Htaw

turned out to be only a dozen students spread out across the school, left to their own devices. I stayed with some of my students, and though communication was limited, we listened to music together. We played games, drew a little, ate dinner and prepared for bed. As the evening went on, the school took on a warm and comforting atmosphere, reminiscent of nights spent gathered around a camp fire.

During my overnight stays, I became closer with one student, who I will call "Mimi". Although I am quite a reserved person, and the language barrier between my students and me presented some challenges, she stayed by my side nonetheless. I once slept over on a Friday, which is when their cell phones are returned to them. As they are only allowed access to them on weekends, the students make the most of the time they have, but Mimi was still willing to keep me company, and she even forced her friends to come play UNO with me, making me feel even more welcome.

We ask each other questions a lot. I met her mom while she was on a call with her, and the burning question of where she lived was on the tip of my tongue. "She is in Myanmar," Mimi said. Unfortunately, the reality of life for boarding students is oftentimes harsh. Some students, like Mimi, have parents who live in Myanmar. They can only talk to them on the phone once or twice a week, which I think must be hard.

As it is my first time traveling abroad without family for a long period of time, I deeply empathize because I know how difficult it is to be separated from your family and to feel homesick, although our situations differ greatly.

Mimi is also immensely generous, which is apparent in everything she does. She invited me at one point to come on a walk outside of the school. We stopped at a local store to buy snacks. I had not brought my wallet with me, but Mimi insisted I take something. She didn't hesitate for a moment to pay for my food. In the few months that I have come to know the Burmese migrant community, I have noticed that giving endlessly is second nature to them.

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Julianne - spending time, enjoying activities with the girls

Regardless of differences, they are eager to lend a helping hand to anyone. I find that quite inspiring. They don't allow their present circumstances to discourage them or to change the goodness within them. Instead, they hold on to every fragment of hope they can find through their profound compassion.

And so, within the walls of Hsa Mu Htaw, a small family of a few teachers and students has blossomed, held together by the school they are part of. They have created a home for

those whose families are separated across borders or whose families work in migrant jobs far away in order to give their children a better future. Within this home, the teachers and students at the dormitory treat another as equals. They share their meals while chatting joyfully, and the female teachers even sleep in the same room as the female students. In this little place they can find the serenity and the security they rightfully deserve.

Language - A barrier or a bridge?

By Laurie Prefontaine, 2026 Volunteer

When the other volunteers and I first got to Mae Sot, our first day was dedicated to visiting the schools where we would be assisting for the next few months. I remember meeting so many students that day. They were so smiley and would say "Mingalaba!" ("Hello!" in Myanmar language) to us with so much happiness.

I remember wanting to say so much more to them than a simple hello, but it was all I knew. Before coming to Mae Sot, my knowledge of Myanmar language was quite low. I had tried to learn some online, but it was much harder for me at that time than now when I am immersed in it daily. Since that first day, I have tried each day to learn new words and sentences. What I have realized through my time with my students and the teachers at BHSOH Learning Center is how much making a small effort goes a long way.

When I get the opportunity to speak in Myanmar, whether it be a simple "How are you?" ("Nay kaung lar?") or "Thank you!" (Kyay zu tin ba deh!) I always do my best to show my willingness to learn more. When I do speak in Myanmar, I see others' reactions. They smile and also sometimes laugh in a very caring way since my pronunciation is sometimes off. They correct me and we can repeat together. This small gesture creates links with some students and teachers who barely speak any English and with whom I never thought I could become so close.

The efforts are also reciprocal when my students speak English. Some of my young students who speak very minimal English and who would normally only say "Hi!" to me, now rush to me in the mornings, happy to show me that they have practiced saying "Good morning teacher!". This small exchange helps create this little relationship and daily habit that would not have existed any other way. Furthermore, my older students know that my first language is French, and they have shown a lot of interest in learning some words to greet me in French in the mornings. My regular mornings now look something like this. First, I am greeted by my



Laurie: "Comment ça va?"

younger students who come running up to me saying "Good morning teacher!" and who then answer my question "How are you?" with "I am good, teacher!". Then, when I get to the higher grades, my students happily welcome me with "Bonjour!" followed by, "Comment ça va professeure?". Before coming

to Mae Sot, I had never realised that just a small exchange could create strong links.

During my time here, I have realized that language barriers can sometimes make it difficult to understand the students outside of the classroom discussions but can also create new opportunities. When talking and playing with me, the students also end up teaching me Myanmar. Each week, I also spend at least one night at the school. One of my favourite parts of staying overnight is when the students teach me Myanmar language. Sometimes, what starts with me asking how to say one word turns into a long conversation in which they teach me new words, correct my pronunciation, and laugh when I struggle to repeat them. Even though I may forget some of the words by the next day, these moments have become some of my favourites. I have realized that these interactions are not really about becoming fluent in each other's languages. They are about showing curiosity and making the other person feel that their language and culture are worth learning about.

Likewise, there are moments when a student wants to tell me a story, explain something that happened to them, or simply talk to me, but we do not have enough words in common. In those moments, we have to find other ways to communicate. We use gestures, A LOT of facial expressions, spellings, drawings, Google Translate, or sometimes we simply laugh and try again. Although frustrating at times, these exchanges have taught me that communication does not always require perfect words. Sometimes, patience and the willingness to listen are just as important.

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What has surprised me the most during my time in Mae Sot is how quickly these small exchanges have become part of our everyday relationships. A “Mingalaba,” a “Good morning teacher,” or a “Bonjour” may seem insignificant, but when they are repeated every day, they become something meaningful. They show recognition, respect, and a desire to connect. The language itself becomes less important than the effort behind it. Looking back at my first day in Mae Sot, when “Mingalaba” was almost the only word I knew, I realize how much has changed. I no longer see the language difference as simply a barrier but rather as an opportunity. A few words in another language can become a smile, a laugh, a lesson and eventually a connection that creates a strong bridge between people.



Laurie
with
new
friends

Open your Eyes!

by Rosemarie Bergeron, 2026 Volunteer



Rosemarie introducing “Imagine”
more I would like to do with them.

As I was teaching my students the song Imagine by John Lennon, I looked around the classroom. When the students heard Lennon sing, “Imagine there’s no countries,” I could sense the confusion in their eyes. Burmese and Karen students living in Mae Sot, Thailand, have grown up with very different experiences of borders, identity, and belonging. As they stood in my classroom singing one of the world’s most peaceful songs, I found myself wondering: Could they really believe in Lennon’s words?

Most of my students at Youth Connect—if not all fourteen of them—come to class every day with a bright smile. I help them with their English for Hospitality for two hours each day, and somehow, it always feels as though I need more time. The hours fly by. In just two weeks, they will graduate, and there is still so much

I try to introduce questions that encourage my students to think critically about the world around them. In my first few weeks, I asked, “What does ‘All we are saying is give peace a chance’ mean?” Their answer was simple: we need to talk peacefully in order to stop the war. Their answer made me realize that my classroom can be about more than learning English. It can also be a space to think critically, open group discussions, share ideas, and explore how we see the world. This is what I believe education should be like. Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” I try to keep this idea in mind in every class. While I am teaching English, I also hope to help my students become more confident, communicate their ideas, ask questions, and recognize their own value.

Recently, we started reading in class. I bought second-hand English books at Chatuchak Market in Bangkok and brought them to my students. I could see the sparks in their eyes when I handed out the books. I also brought several editions of Bishop’s University’s Newsletter, The Campus. I want to open their eyes to the wider world and the possibilities beyond the classroom. One day, I brought a world map to class. It stayed on the board for the entire week! We talked about different countries, landscapes, and landmarks, and their curiosity gave me the perfect opportunity to introduce tourism to my Hospitality class. What began as a simple map became a doorway to conversations about the world beyond Mae Sot.



I came to Mae Sot hoping to share my knowledge, but I have discovered how much I can learn from my students. Many of them are close to my own age—although they don’t know that, and in many ways, we are learning alongside each other. They are teaching me about resilience, curiosity, and seeing the world from a different perspective. There’s a saying that “after the

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rain comes the rainbow,” and I can see this in my experience so far in Mae Sot. During rainy season, showers are part of our daily lives. They can be refreshing, but I cannot say I am a big fan of the rain. Yet when the clouds disperse and the rain stops, I look around and all I see is beauty.

My experience here has felt a little like that. There are challenging moments, but they are often followed by moments of unexpected beauty—a student’s smile, a song sung together, a “Good morning teacher!”, or a moment when I see the world through my students’ eyes. Migrant education is not only about learning language or preparing for a career. It is about creating a space where young people can be curious, express themselves, discover the world, and imagine a future full of possibilities. And perhaps, in helping my students to open their eyes, I am learning to open my own.

Gallery

Lunch preparation (with supplies from MSEP)



Yum! We get to eat



Schools are busy places....



Singing events - and learning about human rights with artist friend Maung Maung Tinn



For more information about all our 2026 partners, go to <https://maesoteducation.ca/partners/> on our website.



And of course, our volunteers join in on all sorts of activities including...football!

Project development - Reflecting on the future

By Project Committee Members Maika Beland and Mary Evans



On August 22nd, MSEP's Project Committee gathered for an in-person meeting in Lennoxville. We had numerous discussion topics on the agenda, but the one that was in our hearts was brainstorming the future of this project. We are a team of volunteers ranging in age from early 20s to well past retirement age. Thus reflecting on longer term development – beyond the next few years – was inevitable. The conclusion was unanimous among the younger members of our team especially: the project has to continue. It is hard to know exactly how it will look in the coming years, but we are dedicated to keeping our core values the same. We want to continue contributing to the education of young Myanmar migrants in learning centres in Mae Sot. MSEP serves the migrant community there and the young Canadians who become volunteers in a very important way.

At the same time those involved in future development will need to find ways to make the time we give more financially sustainable and to create more opportunities for young volunteers to take on responsibilities, bring new ideas and eventually become the people who carry the project forward. What gives us confidence in the future is that the project has always been small and about people coming together to make a difference. It has never been about one person, one generation, or one particular way of doing things. Even though some aspects might change, the team staying on will always keep these aspects of MSEP in mind.

We thank our donors and mentors who support us and who will hopefully continue to follow us through this journey. The Mae Sot Education Project is something incredibly special that has changed many lives. We hope to continue serving migrant and refugee youth as long as possible, and we cannot not do it without continued support from our community in the Eastern Townships and in Mae Sot.

Who we are and what we do

The *Mae Sot Education Project (MSEP)* is a community project based in the Lennoxville borough of Sherbrooke, Quebec. Since 2004, we have provided assistance to six schools for migrant and refugee youth from Burma/Myanmar whose access to education depends on support from the international community. In recent years we have also worked with other schools. Each year we select a group of young people from the Bishop's University and Champlain College – Lennoxville campus to go to Mae Sot for three to six months. While there, they provide practical assistance to teachers and enrichment activities for children in the schools. They learn about the situation of displacement experienced by the Burmese people in Thailand as well as about the challenges for the Thai community in coping with a large population of refugees and migrants. Finally, they share their experience with Canadians. Over the last 22 years, MSEP has delivered well over \$200,000 in funding assistance (excluding two substantial grants given through specific donations) and as of June 2026, has sent 77 young volunteers to assist the migrant education community in Mae Sot.

The Project Committee and TEFL training team is made up of members of the community, former faculty from Bishop's and Champlain, and former youth volunteers with the project. Currently, members are: Maika Beland (2024 volunteer), Charles Chevrier (2023 volunteer), Felix Duplessis-Marcotte (2016 volunteer), Mary Evans (2025 volunteer), Judy Keenan, Loic Arguin-Mercier (2017 volunteer), Graham Moodie, Mary Purkey, Angie Petitclerc, Susan Renaud, Calila Tardif (2016 volunteer)

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