



# Mae Sot Education Project

## Newsletter

### Summer 2023

<https://maesoteducation.ca>

For more information, contact us at [maesoteducationproject@gmail.com](mailto:maesoteducationproject@gmail.com)

## MSEP Project Development - Loic travels to Mae Sot for the Project Committee

By Loic Mercier, 2017 Volunteer & Project Committee Member

Thanks to a generous grant from Bishop's University, I had the incredible opportunity to revisit our partners in Mae Sot this summer, a place that holds deep personal significance for me since I volunteered there in 2017. As I returned to this border community, I was immediately struck by the significant changes that have taken place.

In Mae Sot, migrant education is facing unprecedented challenges due to the dual crises of COVID-19 and the military coup in Myanmar. These crises have put immense pressure on our partner organizations, particularly evident in the substantial increase in enrollment at migrant learning centers (MLCs)

across the area. With over 11,000 students now enrolled in 46 learning centers (InEd, 2022), many schools are struggling to keep up with the demand for education. The limited financial resources available make it even more challenging to provide adequate salaries, resulting in a concerning annual teacher turnover rate of 30% in these schools.

During my visit to Mae Sot, I observed numerous changes in classroom sizes and overall operations. Each MLC I visited was in the process of constructing new classrooms and introducing innovative programs, including professional courses like mechanics and sewing, as well as the classic GED program.

As always, our presence was warmly welcomed by our partner schools. They emphasized time and again how crucial our support is to their mission. While we are aware that our assistance cannot fulfill all their extensive needs, having two additional English volunteers in the schools, bringing optimism and hope, makes an immense difference. Furthermore, the consistent financial contributions we have made over the years have enabled the MLCs to overcome various challenges. These contributions have been instrumental in the construction of essential infrastructure, such as classrooms and dining halls, and have also supported teacher salaries, transportation, and other expenses that have inevitably increased with the surge in student enrollment.

In closing, my experience in Mae Sot has reaffirmed the vital importance of continuing our commitment to empowering migrant education. As we navigate the ever-evolving landscape of these challenging times, MSEP's unwavering dedication to providing educational opportunities is making a tangible difference in the lives of these students, instilling hope and paving the way to a brighter future for all. Our collective support remains essential in fostering positive change and creating a lasting impact on the educational landscape of Mae Sot. Together, we can continue to make a meaningful difference in the lives of these talented and deserving students.



Loic (rear left) visiting MLC partners with Amy (front left) and Charles (wearing Blue hat)

## Looking ahead - What next for MSEP?

Now that Loic has had a chance to assess our partners' situations, we at MSEP are discussing how we can best support them. In the next months we will be recruiting new volunteers. It is clear that longer volunteer stints have a greater impact on both children and volunteers and are deeply appreciated by schools. We must be mindful of the needs of the community we are trying to assist and of how we can be most effective. Thus we will continue to seek volunteers who are prepared to stay for 6 months but alternatively will consider volunteers for shorter periods if special circumstances (e.g., university programs) make longer commitments difficult.

In addition, in the coming weeks, Loic will be reaching out to younger members of our community who might be interested in joining our project committee. In the interests



*Some members of our team at*

*a recent "4 á 6" project event*

of continuing the work begun over the last 19 years, we are seeking "younger" (a somewhat relative term!) people who seek deep engagement in this kind of international cooperation as a pathway to their own personal growth and to fulfillment of a responsibility we all share to support struggling communities, and particularly children, in the world. The MSEP Project Committee is a very informal group. We meet monthly and make decisions through discussion and consensus. We all share in management, outreach, volunteer preparation and fundraising tasks according to our various talents. We do a lot of our consulting by email, and we hold occasional fundraisers to support our volunteers and partners.

Please contact Loic Mercier ([loicam1999@gmail.com](mailto:loicam1999@gmail.com)) or Mary Purkey ([marypurkey@gmail.com](mailto:marypurkey@gmail.com)) if you are interested!

**MSEP has a new URL: <https://maesoteducation.ca>**

## Our Volunteers' Experience and Perspectives



**Helping students learn about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - First the girls....**

**...then the boys!**





# Volunteering in Mae Sot – Managing Challenges & Transferring Hope

By Charles Chevrier, 2023 Volunteer



*Charles – busy in the classroom*

Pedaling to Parami, sweat glistens on my face, the pungent aroma of durian fills the air, and I navigate the traffic like a sailboat in a storm. My mind is busy. Not busy with the heat, or the smells, or even the traffic, however. My mind is busy reciting the scenarios of interactions with the students. Indeed, that's where it all begins: the students. They are the heart of this captivating odyssey.

I must thank my students for making this first teaching experience of mine a positively memorable one, as their devotion to learning and bettering their conditions is unparalleled and surpasses those of students back in Canada, myself included. Education is so normal for us that it has become banal, and merely viewed as just a long phase of life that everyone must endure. We seem to forget the power that education holds because of this.

The academic culture in the migrant education community here in Mae Sot is quite different from back home, particularly with the presence of the “pyramid effect” here. This effect refers to a rapid decline in the number of students as the grade levels progress. As a volunteer who deals with a wide range of grades, from 5 to 11, I have observed this phenomenon firsthand. In my lower grade classes, there is an average of 40 students, which gradually decreases as the grades advance. There are multiple reasons for this: dropping out to work to support their families, lack of parental support to stay in school, economic hardships, lack of motivation, and displacement are amongst the most prevalent reasons.

Another aspect that caught my attention during my first week of teaching is the evident gender divergence. In all the classes I have seen, there is a clear division in seating arrangements between boys and girls. On the boys' side, there is a noticeable discrepancy in their English proficiency compared to their girl counterparts. This side tends to be noisier and more energetic, reflecting common characteristics associated with boys. Conversely, the girls exhibit a greater degree of focus, composure, and overall proficiency in English. Along with this gender disparity, there is also the issue of mixed ability. Having classes of 40 students comes with many challenges. The most glaring issue is indeed mixed ability. The range of English proficiency is incredibly large and complicates lesson planning quite a bit. A solution I have found to be quite effective however is pair/group work during which stronger students seem to naturally help their weaker classmates.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the contrasting experiences between teaching younger and older students. I have found working with older students more rewarding due to the opportunities it provides to introduce complex ideas and engage in deeper discussions. For example, I am discussing human rights with students in grades 8, 9, and 10 at Parami. While all the grade levels comprehend the overarching concepts, the conversations I have with grade 10 students are noticeably more stimulating compared to those with grade 8 or 9 students. Conversely, at Hsa Mu Htaw, where I instruct grade 5 and 6 students, I focus on fundamental concepts such as familial relationships. I am eagerly anticipating the second half of my adventure, fully aware that it will bring forth a new array of discoveries and stories.

The challenges that these students face are not to be taken lightly, and many realize the importance of dealing promptly with them. These issues are vast and intricate; dealing with them seems intimidating. However, it all starts with the individual. All help is crucial to bettering the lives of each of these students. When I see smiles on the faces of the students, laughter echoing around the grounds of the schools, and the dedication of the students to learn, I realize something: volunteering here is much more than just a transfer of knowledge, it's a transfer of hope.



*Chatting with partners...*



*Meeting large classes...*



*Time out with friends at Lucky Tea Shop!*

# Lunchtime Lessons

By Amy Marchand Dion, 2023 Volunteer



*Amy helping some of her students*

I have to be honest and admit that writing for the summer newsletter has been a personal challenge. Every time I sat down to write, I kept wondering: Where do I start? Not only that, but: How do I put all this into *words*? Even now, I struggle putting into words the experiences I have lived inside and outside the classroom, the conversations I have had with students and teachers, and the essence and impact of my work in migrant learning centers thus far. Nevertheless, I always come back to two heartfelt conversations.

At one school, we are sitting around a lunch of tomato salad, noodles and vegetables, rice and homemade crispy potato chips. The teacher sitting to my left, only a couple of years older than me, calm and somewhat timid, confesses that although his dream is to someday go back to university to finish his studies, he knows that his duty is right here, at this school, with the children. Early in the morning, with only one school car, he drives back and forth to get all the students from their homes to the school (maybe three, four trips). He teaches all day, all subjects. He eats with the students, makes sure they are well. He treats the children as his own. At the end of the day, he drives back and forth from the school again, taking the students' home.

At another school, five of us are sitting crossed-legged on a rustic mat and laying out our shared-lunches in the

middle of the circle – rice, tofu tomato curry, fish, pumpkin curry, bamboo shoots, baby cucumbers and boiled eggs. The four teachers (two have been at the school for more than 10 years and two arrived in 2021) admit the challenges of teaching 24 periods per week with few resources for an ever-growing student population. With sweat dripping from my forehead, I watch them laughing and continuing to dig into the feast. We keep conversing, with students walking in and out of the circle, sitting on one teacher's legs, re-applying thanaka paste to their skin, laughing and playing among themselves.

Although it is widely known that teachers in migrant learning centers in and around Mae Sot are indeed overworked and fatigued, they are far from being unmotivated, dispassionate, or indifferent. They are the uttermost opposite. In all the learning centers I have had the opportunity to support for the past two months (BHSOH, Pyo Khinn, Hsa Thoo Lei and Hsa Mu Htaw), I can testify from what I have seen with my own eyes that every day, school staff, teachers, food service workers, headmasters, parents, and everyone else involved in the process of getting a child to school, demonstrate the most inspiring levels of perseverance, grit, toughness, and care. Despite the intense heat in classrooms as a result of lack of airflow and despite the rain dripping from between the cracks of a hand-made roof made of leaves and despite full days of standing in front of 45-student classes and despite having to write on a book because the surfaces of the desks are too damaged, and despite the countless flies swirling around their heads and despite the numerous back and forths between the school and the students' houses, they keep going. Every day, they choose to help others before themselves, and they choose to build the next generation by prioritizing education and love over war and hatred.

Overall, struggling to put into words what I have lived so far in Mae Sot simply points to the fact that this experience is opening my eyes to a truly unfamiliar reality. Perhaps the biggest takeaway I have had so far is to make the time to sit down, share a meal, and open your heart to the people sitting across from you.



*Lunchtime at migrant schools*



# Remembering Myanmar

## Rainy Season

A Reflection by Charles Chevrier, 2023 Volunteer

*It's raining. I hear the rain, I feel the rain, and I know it will inevitably happen. The rain manifests the natural order of things in the biosphere. Rain is unpredictable. Will it rain tomorrow? There's a chance. There is always a chance. Yet I do not fear the rain.*

*This natural constant remains me of another unpredictable yet common phenomenon. The rain that falls on Burma. This rain is different, though. When the people of Burma hear the rain, they are overwhelmed with fear. When they feel the rain, it is too late.*

*The rain here in Mae Sot falls indiscriminately. The rain in Burma does not, it falls on those who resist these injustices. The rain here in Mae Sot nourishes the land. The rain in Burma does not. The rain here in Mae Sot provides a serene white noise. The rain in Burma provides a loud symphony of fear.*

*The rain in Burma is the reason I am here in Mae Sot. It is also the reason why my students are here: ignored by the global community, ignored by my country, Canada, ignored by the media.*

*Is defending democracy only important when there are financial incentives to do so? Is helping refugees only acceptable when they are similar to us? Is it not even worth it to try and raise awareness for democracy or humanitarianism? I am relieved that some people do notice this deadly metallic rain. I am proud of those volunteers I see everyday fighting in silence alongside the refugees. I am proud of those who provide financial aid, as it is worth so much. I am proud of those individuals and organizations who support these refugees.*

*While this rain continues to darken the skies and violently shake the earth beneath Burma, hope prevails. Let us allocate resources and raise awareness about the bombings. Any help makes a considerable and unimaginable difference.*



Among the military's most widely purchased Russian-made helicopters are the Mi-28s (DIMITAR DILKOFF/AFP via Getty Images)



Seeking refuge from air raids, children take shelter nightly in a cave in Demoso Township in Myanmar in July.

(Esther J / Myanmar Now <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/karenni-idps-search-for-new-ways-to-survive-myanmar-junta-airstrikes/>)

## Read more about the situation in Myanmar/Burma at the web sites of these civil society organizations and news sources:

**Progressive Voice** is a participatory rights-based policy research and advocacy organization rooted in civil society, that maintains strong networks and relationships with grassroots organizations and community-based organizations throughout Myanmar. [www.progressivevoicemyanmar.org/](http://www.progressivevoicemyanmar.org/)

**Frontier Myanmar** is a new independent media source that provides in depth reporting of the conflict in Myanmar. [www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/](http://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/)

**The Irrawaddy** is an independent news source that has covered events in Burma/Myanmar from an opposition perspective for decades. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/>

**Democratic Voice of Burma** is another independent news source that has been covering events in Burma/Myanmar from an opposition perspective for decades. <https://english.dvb.no/>

## English Enrichment from Lennoxville



Mary's Group



Lee's Group (missing three of the students)

Today we are going to practice interviews for jobs...What do you think your prospective employer will want to hear from you? Next time we meet, we will discuss important issues in your lives: Why is school important? What is difficult about living in Thailand? Why is it important for you to learn Thai? Which is more important: family or friends? What do you think you can do to become a better person? Do you know what modals (may, can, might, should, must.....) are? When do you use present progressive, present, past or past progressive verbs? English is more complicated than Burmese!



Since the beginning of Covid, two Lennoxvillians, Lee Sullivan and Mary Purkey, have been zooming with older students at BHSOH Learning Centre to help them practice their English. Communication can be challenging as internet connections are not always perfect. Nonetheless, we marvel at the fact that we can do this at all – connect with kids half a world and numerous time zones away. Do the meetings help them? However much their English improves (or not), they want to be with us. Perhaps the real benefit is knowing that people far away know who they are and care about how their lives are going.

### *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 Bishop's University and Champlain College – Lennoxville 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 18 years, MSEP has delivered over \$213,000 in funding assistance (excluding two substantial grants given through specific donations) and as of June 2022, has sent 65 volunteers to assist the migrant education community in Mae Sot.

The Project Committee 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: Felix Duplessis-Marcotte (2016 volunteer), Judy Keenan, Loic Mercier Arguin (2017 volunteer), Graham Moodie, Angie Petitclerc, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, and Calila Tardif (2016 volunteer)

**Contributions to the project are always welcome, and tax receipts are issued.** To make a donation electronically, you may do so through the Bishop's University Foundation on our web site at: <https://maesot.ubishops.ca/donate-now/>. Remember to indicate that your donation is for the *Mae Sot Education Project*. Or, donate by cheque through *either* the Bishop's Foundation or the Champlain College Foundation at our project address: Box 67, Champlain College – Lennoxville, 2580 College St, Sherbrooke, QC J1M 2K3. **Be sure to include the name of the Foundation and MSEP on your cheque.**