



Mae Sot Education Project Fall 2012



An Appeal

Dear MSEP Friends and Supporters,

This letter is an appeal to you to continue your financial support for our project in the coming year. Burmese migrant schools in Thailand need assistance particularly during this time when their country is just beginning what could be years of transition to what (optimistically) will be a more open and prosperous society. The situation in Burma/Myanmar (with Myanmar becoming the name more commonly used) is changing. The public space for discussion seems to have expanded just a bit. The level of violence

by the military that has typified the last years seems to have abated. Some Burmese in Thailand who two years ago would have been afraid to cross the border are making careful excursions to check out the situation there. Among our school partners, there is less desperation, less fear.

Nonetheless, ordinary people in Myanmar face the same challenges that they have for decades, the same dysfunctional health care system, the same poverty. Resource development projects controlled by wealthy military families and their foreign consorts are leading to land confiscations in ethnic states. In Rakhine State, where the world has seen new violence and flows of refugees from the country, there is evidence that the government

has fostered conflict between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists so that it can acquire land for a mega free trade zone in the presently undeveloped west of the country. In the north, the Kachin are still fighting a war. Forced recruitment into the military is still going on in ethnic regions. Lines have also been carefully drawn around just how much dissent is permitted to community based organizations. Those who cross these lines are still being arrested.

We are asking for your help at a time when some of the big NGOs have chosen to shift their attention to Myanmar itself. Funding for the Mae Tao Clinic and for migrant learning centres in Mae Sot is down. Our volunteers have done marvelous work this year and their contributions, along with our financial assistance are deeply appreciated. We do not want to desert our partners. We want them to be able to choose the time when it will be appropriate for them to return to their country. Until the time is right, they need support as they continue to deliver much needed education to Burmese youth.

Donations to the Mae Sot Education Project may be made out to the MSEP – Bishop’s University Foundation or MSEP – Champlain Foundation and sent to Mae Sot Education Project, Box 67, Champlain College – Lennoxville, Sherbrook, Quebec, J1M 2A1. Receipts for charitable donations will be issued for donations of \$20 or more. We are grateful for all donations, large and small.

On behalf of our Project Committee, Volunteers and Burmese Partners,

Mary Purkey, Project Coordinator



A Conversation with a Stranger

By Michelle Frise, 2012 MSEP Volunteer

After only two days in Bangkok, I was eager to get back “home” to Mae Sot. Stepping onto the bus, holding a shopping bag in one hand and my bus ticket in the other, I was ready to curl up on my seat, put on my headphones, and sleep away the next eight hours. With only 10 minutes left until the departure time, the bus was filling up quickly. The seat next to me was soon taken by a Burmese man, maybe 30 years old. I did the regular head nod and smile of acknowledgment that has become a part of my travelling routine.

It was about two minutes before the bus was due to leave, when this man turned to me and asked in perfect English, “Is it your first time travelling to Mae Sot?” That was the jumping in point. I explained how I had actually lived in Mae Sot for about 5 months and was volunteer teaching. He told me he was a teacher as well and taught at a Burmese Migrant school and orphanage. My interest was immediately piqued! I explained that I, too, was working in two Burmese migrant schools. We spent the next twenty minutes or so reminiscing about our schools like proud parents talking about their child’s dance recital.

Soon we turned to more serious discussions. He asked me what the biggest issues are in Canada right now and in all honesty I felt foolish talking about it. Do our “big issues” even compare to those of Myanmar? Would I sound



Mary and 2012 MSEP Volunteers in Mae Sot.

Left to Right: Alexis Chouan, Mary Purkey, Alex Marcotte, Michelle Frise, Meaghan Moniz, Gabriella Brault-Fotier and Samantha Silva.

ridiculous talking about my home country where apathy reigns, where democracy and peace are often taken for granted? I explained that our country is peaceful and that most of the debate is around budget and tax issues. One issue I explained to him was the tension between the French speaking people of Quebec and the English speakers. In a perhaps desperate attempt to make a connection between the many ethnicities in Burma and the French-English divide in Canada, I explained how important it is for many Quebecers to hold onto their French heritage and culture. The feeling of foolishness crept up on me again as I reflected on how these issues seemed so inconsequential in comparison to the issues facing Burmese people today.

Nevertheless, he seemed intrigued. I soon realized that hearing first-hand about a functioning democratic system from a person who had grown up within this system was actually quite fascinating for this man. I asked him if he believed the situation

When I asked my grade 11 students what they wished to accomplish in their futures, they astounded me with responses about becoming leaders for their community, setting up orphanages or schools for their people. But this stranger was right; my students, who in this class are all Karen, did not say they wanted to help people from Burma, but rather, the Karen people (or as my students say, "My ethnic group"). Initially when I was reading these essays, I had not necessarily seen anything wrong with this idea. I thought it was admirable that they cared so much to go back to Burma and support and educate their home villages. Pride in one's ethnic group is definitely something to be valued. However, this stranger asked: if the people in Burma only care for the welfare of their own ethnic group, how will the country ever unite as one? Even though Karen himself, he expressed the need to think as one people in order to be one country. Again, he stressed how this way of thinking does not simply happen. The way to know how to have a democracy starts with education as a child.

So what does this mean for us as volunteers in migrant schools? What does this mean for our students? This year for the first time, a group of 70 students in migrant schools in Mae Sot are being given the opportunity to write the Burmese matriculation exams in Burma. I have witnessed the group of students as they prepare for these upcoming exams, sitting in matriculation classes six long days a week. These examinations hold a lot of promise for them. If they pass they will be able to continue their studies in Myanmar or elsewhere. It also means an "official" graduation from high school.

The man on the bus expressed his view that the Burmese exams will be difficult for the students here. Foreign teachers, Thai curriculum, and changing ideas in education have all led to more progressive teaching here in Mae Sot, using critical thinking and individual ideas to gain a better understanding of the world and how to access it. Learning facts and spitting them back out is not the aim, but rather, learning how to interpret, question, and apply knowledge is the focus. The Burmese system is more traditional, with memorization and repetition playing a key

role. My new friend was worried about what will happen when we send the students from migrant schools to take the exam. They may approach a question more critically and give an accurate answer, but not necessarily the answer that was expected. Only time will tell if this approach will create a successful path for the students here in Mae Sot. The migrant schools must now also ask themselves what they want for their students. Do they want the students to return to the traditional education system in Burma where their heritage lies, or do they want to incorporate the students into the Thai system, where they can continue their studies, where they have been growing up? The two alternatives lead down completely different paths.



Michelle poses with children from her class.

in Burma was really changing. He thought for a moment and said he believed it was—but on a superficial basis. He explained how the goal is to have the country united under one democracy, and this is still far from happening. How does a country suddenly become a democracy? How do the people know what a democracy should look like? He answered these questions simply: it starts with education. It starts with the youth. The problem, he said, is that people in Burma do not think about the country as one. They do not think of themselves as "people of Burma" but rather, they identify with their own ethnic group. This immediately struck a chord with me as words I had read from my students flashed back into my head.

As the hours passed, I realized that this man and myself were the only voices on the bus; everyone else had fallen into semi-conscious sleep. We said goodnight and I finally turned to gaze out the window. There were so many thoughts in my head that sleep took a long time to come to me. When I awoke we had reached the checkpoint just outside Mae Sot, and my stranger friend was getting off, again, with the nod and smile of acknowledgment as I drifted into consciousness. I am furious with myself now that in my half-asleep state, I never asked his name. I wish he knew the impact our conversation had on me and my remaining time here.

Working toward Sustainability

By Samantha Silva, 2012 MSEP Volunteer

While migrant schools around Mae Sot ask for funding, they are also trying to think of ways to become more sustainable and cut down on some costs. One of the initiatives that I have noticed in the schools is gardening projects. Teachers, students, and even some volunteers are working together to turn spaces small and large into gardens suitable for the schools' needs.

At Parami Learning Centre, a school with more space than most, there are now two sizeable gardens. Both gardens grow a variety of fruits and vegetables, from carrots and pumpkins to chillies and other spices. On any given Saturday or Sunday morning, students and resident teachers can be found in the gardens, ensuring that their crops have enough nutrients and water, and are growing appropriately. Along with the experience of tending their garden, the students are given the opportunity to sell some of the fruits and vegetables at a nearby market on weekends.

This project not only gives the students more variety in their diets, but it also cuts down on the amount of money used on



food, and allows the students to practice gardening and trading, two very useful skills. Hsa Mu Htaw, a school with less space to spare, has recently received the help of other volunteers to put together a small hanging garden that is positioned along the outside wall of the schoolhouse. This small garden is tended to by students, each of whom is in charge of his or her own row of plants. Each plant is housed inside of an old plastic bottle with the bottom cut off, and each bottle is hung on a plastic rod that is attached to the wall. This initiative has allowed the school to grow vegetables which they are able to include in their meals. And the children say that they taste much better than the vegetables purchased in the market.

Another project at Hsa Mu Htaw school is a mushroom project. Room to Grow, another organization in Mae Sot, has provided the school with spore bags that have allowed students and teachers to grow their own mushrooms. These mushrooms are then cooked for the students or, they are taken to a market by the students who then have the chance to sell or trade these mushrooms for other goods and foods that they think will be useful to the school.

These gardening and trading projects initiated by the schools and other organizations have been proving their value through the skills that they are giving to the students. They also show the resourcefulness of schools around Mae Sot and how valuable a task as small as gardening can be.



Samantha with Parami students at a Karen wrist-tying festival.



Hsa Mu Htaw students unloading the mushroom packages delivered by Room to Grow.

Why Your Help Still Matters

By Alexandra Marcotte, 2012 MSEP Volunteer

“I will have an identity in Burma” says 32 years old Aung Min Soe current teacher at Hsa Mu Htaw School when asked why he wants to go back to Burma. Thai people fail to recognise Burmese people, argues another teacher. Identity is one of the main reasons why Burmese people want to go back in Burma, not for their cultural identity (which is respected in Thailand) but for the sake of being someone, being recognised as an individual in this world. Even though they want to go home, the terrible living conditions and insecurity prevent them from returning.

On the Thai side of the border, Burmese people also face a lot of insecurity. Even though they have no citizenship, often no identity papers, their families are split apart, and they do not speak Thai, living in Thailand is still better than living in Burma. All the same, Burmese migrant people work as housemaids or in factories and are able to support their families in Burma. Some people who work and sleep at a factory have no home, and their children have nowhere to live. This is why Hsa Mu Htaw School started its boarding house in 2009. There are more boarding students at present than there were at the beginning. Burmese people on the Thai side of the border need help more than ever. The adults of tomorrow need to have their basic needs met and have access to education now in order to be active members of the world and rebuild their country.

Joint Efforts Give Results

The migrant schools receive no help from the Thai government; they are left alone to support themselves, the teachers, and the students who attend the schools. However, a number of organisations are working together to support them. Here are some I have encountered while volunteering at Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Centre. The first two are actually Canadian NGOs!

Imagine Thailand

Imagine Thailand, a faith-based organization, has bought the big drinking water system which provides the school with safe water to drink every day; a single but indispensable contribution.

Room To Grow Foundation

For two years now, mushrooms have been growing in a dark room on HMH school grounds. When the mushrooms are ready to be eaten, some are cooked and eaten by the boarding students and teachers, and the rest are sold on market day. The money gathered is used to buy new mushroom packages. As Room to Grow has been donating new mushroom packages every three months and the school has also been able to buy some more, HMH Learning Centre has been able to put aside some of the money gained from the mushroom sales. This money has come in really handy to pay for some of the numerous school running costs, for example, the cost of water. Room to Grow also covers the cost of breakfast and supper for the boarding students and teachers.

Thai Children's Trust

With regular funding from Thai Children's Trust, a British organisation, HMH Learning Centre is able to provide all its students with a meal at lunch time. This ensures that every student eats at least one proper meal a day. For the nursery students, who are more at risk of malnutrition, Thai Children's Trust also provides enough money for the young children to eat a snack during the day.

The Montessori Project

Since last December, the nursery students have had a new protector. Khom Loy Development Foundation has brought a Montessori Project to the school that pays for the nursery building each month as well as for one teacher salary. The Montessori Project offers teacher training and provides all the materials for its program. An Indonesian teacher volunteer is helping to get the project started.



Alexandra and her students wearing MSEP T-shirts!

Migrant Education

Many private donors contribute to Hsa Mu Htaw Learning Centre through Migrant Education (ME), a Burmese, community-based organisation funded by foreign donors which channels funding for the school's running costs and teacher salaries. Unfortunately, ME does not get enough from the donors. As a result, teachers can work for months without receiving their salaries. Whereas teachers may patiently wait to get their money, transportation fees cannot. Most of the 301 students who attend HMH depend on the school bus to get to the school. The monthly transportation cost of 18 000 THB (\$600 CAD) becomes a real nightmare without financial help. Because of ME's problems, HMH has had to request students' parents' assistance to help pay for transportation fees. For some parents, who barely have enough money to support their own family, it was not within their means. 10 000 THB from the Mae Sot Education Project combined with 800 THB from the student's families (who could afford it) paid for October transportation fees.

Mae Sot Education Project (That's us!)

While bigger organisations (like the ones mentioned above) can provide money to cover fees such as food and teacher salaries, the money Mae Sot Education Project (MSEP) can give to the school is most welcome to cover transportation fees or smaller bills (new building roof, chairs, ink for the printer, etc.). What's more, the students who have been taught by the MSEP Canadian volunteers over the years have much better English than the other students.



It is the regularity of funding that is responsible for the stability of the migrant schools which in turn ensures equal chance for all children to attend school and receive quality education. Aung Min Soe (cited above) is convinced that the help the Mae Sot Education Project is offering to migrant schools is essential. He argues that students in Mae Sot have the chance to meet and bond with westerners. It gives the migrant students the ability to work hand-in-hand with foreigners in a near future whereas students in Burma are not familiar with westerners and hence "are

afraid of foreigners". Everyone's contribution is required and is responsible for the safe environment in which students acquire valuable skills and knowledge. Let's keep on assisting Burmese migrant people!

A Little Bit of Hope

By Gabriella Brault-Fortier, 2012 MSEP Volunteer

As our time in Mae Sot quickly goes by, I have found that I am becoming sensitive to new people who, although I had noticed them before, I had ignored for the most part. These are the street children, kids who are forced to beg for money for their families. Some might not even collect money or food for their family but rather for a leader; someone who provides them with shelter for the night but forces them to beg for meals and later takes their begging money.

What is especially hard about accepting this harsh reality is that I now see my students through a different lens; I am scared for them. As I watch my students laugh, sing, play fight, eat candy I wonder how I would react if one day I saw one of my students begging by the 7/11. About two weeks ago one of my students stopped showing up at school. The first few days I didn't think anything of it because it's normal for kids to miss weeks of school at a time in order to go visit their families in the refugee camps. However, when the week went by and the next Monday he still wasn't there, I started to worry. I asked my headmaster, and he said that he would go to the boy's house that night and find out what was going on. The next day he hesitantly told me that my student wouldn't be coming back. He told me that Nin Tun was from a very poor family and that he was probably forced to start working to contribute to the family income. I was shocked. Just like that I had lost a student and would never see him again. As I think about this young, 10 year old boy working, I cross my fingers hoping he is not on the streets begging.



These students clearly hang on to Gabriella's every word.

This new interest in wanting to help these kids led me to get in contact with another Canadian organization here in Mae Sot called Compasio. It helps the street children in numerous ways such as establishing a drop-in center, an emergency shelter, an infant home for babies who are born inside the prison or are abandoned at the hospital. When I met with the Compasio team at their office, it happened to coincide with their weekly visit to the garbage dump. They invited me to join them; we would spend a couple hours with the families and play games with the kids.

As we approach the dump, the smell is nauseating but almost worse is the instant headache you'll get from it. We drive

have hope; hope that one day Burma will see a real democracy and they will be able to return home. When I talk to my Headmaster and ask what would happen one day if there was no more funding for the school, closing down is never an option. Where there's a will, there's a way. When I would think there are no more options, the Burmese are still smiling and saying, "No problem." The best way I've heard them being described as is "Happy-go-lucky" and I couldn't agree more. It is admirable, unbelievable really, considering what they've been through and the difficulties they face daily.

Return to Burma not yet Possible

By Alexis Chouan, MSEP Volunteer

Parami is one of our partner schools in the Mae Sot area. Open for 13 years, the school has expanded from nursery and kindergarten all the way to Grade 9, teaching over 550 migrant students. In light of ongoing reforms in Burma, I interviewed Min Lwin, head of the school and Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB) activist, about the future of Parami and the country we all have our eyes on.

down the street filled with pot holes and to each side of us are mountain high piles of garbage. My first thought is that it looks like a sick apocalyptic video game. It looks surreal, like I've just stepped into a new world. As we get closer to the "houses", we see people on the side of the road rummaging through the new garbage bags looking for anything recyclable: bottles, clothes, shoes, and even food. We get off the truck and put a tarp on the floor and start coloring with the kids. A nurse is with the Compasio team and she walks around giving medical attention to whoever needs it. The kids are happy we are there; we play jumping rope with them, we paint their nails, we take them in our arms and give them love and much needed attention. Right outside the garbage dump is a school, Sky Blue, for the kids to attend. At least the kids are getting an education, but I doubt all of them go. The hardest thing for me to accept is that this, living at the garbage dump, is actually considered an option for these families. When all other options are exhausted, living at the garbage dump is still a feasible one.

However, it goes without saying that even though they live at the garbage dump, it doesn't make them less happy. One thing that distinguishes Burmese people from everybody else I've met so far in my life is that even though they've seen hard times (Some might be poor, have no job, some are stateless, homeless, orphans. The list is far from being exhausted), the Burmese are some of the happiest people I've met. When I visited the dump I was greeted with smiling faces and was welcomed into their homes. They weren't ashamed or depressed; they were happy to see us and have someone to visit with. This, I believe, is because they

How did you get involved in education in the border?

I joined the trade union and when working with migrant issues, we realized that a school was needed for migrant workers' children.

What are some challenges you have faces in building the school?

In the last 7 years, we've faced financial difficulties, so that we cannot extend our classes. The plan is to extend one grade every year. But we could not, especially for the past two years.



Min Lwin, an old friend.

What changes can you see happening in Burma now?

For education, there is nothing changing. I see that, in Burma, there was a brain drain in the last 50 years.

What is the difference in between migrant schools and Burmese schools?

Burma has well trained teachers. But the schools lack infrastructure and the system is very bad. We still see that they lack critical thinking, creative ideas and proper information.

Are migrants beginning to return to Burma?

This year, we had at least 160 new children coming from Burma. Many schools are like that. We only had two students who returned to Burma,

What needs to change for you to return?

We want to work. I'm not sure if my name is blacklisted. If I go to Burma, maybe they will arrest me. Within 5 or 6 years Burma and Thailand want to set up a special economic zone. I hope—this is just my imagination—maybe sooner or later, the refugees will be repatriated and we will join them, maybe in a remote area and then set up our school, to continue Parami in Burma.

What can we do to help you?

The Canadian support is lovely, with very selective people, who are well trained and are doing that work quietly and effectively. It is important for the volunteers and the supporters of your project to understand why the migration is happening and the reasons we are afraid to return. You should also express these concerns to your government.

Note: Recently, Min Lwin has been asked by the FTUB to return to Burma to help organize unions for farmers, now that they are theoretically permitted to register. Land confiscation is one of the big problems in Burma right now, and the hope is that organization will enable farmers to protect their land from creditors and developers. It remains to be seen whether unions will be able to take effective actions. Like so many stories in Burma right now, this one is just beginning.

On Measuring Educational Outcomes

By Mary Purkey, MSEP Coordinator

Sitting with U Khaing Oo Maung, one of our oldest partners and friends in Mae Sot, looking out at the fields that surround BHSOH school, I feel that I am as close to what has driven our project as I can be. Here is one of the “originals” of the democracy movement in Burma, a man who began his life-long career as an activist-educator as a young teacher in 1962 when dictatorship came to Burma, who endured imprisonment and exile and then much later started one of the very first migrant schools in Mae Sot. Today, in his late 60s, Khaing Oo Maung still repeats the refrain I have heard in our every communication over the last 8 years: that it is the children of Burma will bring democracy to their country and that we in the international community need to support them.

While some find the repetition amusing (“Oh what a character Khaing Oo Maung is.”), his constancy and the school that he created and continues to infuse with his vision of an inclusive, democratic and peaceful society are to me inspirational. BHSOH has nurtured students who have gone on to become artists, university students and then professionals, teachers at the school, and of course political activists. Their stories are still unfolding. Mae Sot Education Project volunteers have been fortunate enough to be able to help many of them learn English and prepare for GED exams that, if passed, can lead to higher education. Ko Ko, one of these students who was just a few years ago learning English from a volunteer, now sits with us sharing ideas about pedagogy, about how to create mutually beneficial partnerships between Canadian volunteers and young Burmese teachers, and of course, about how to make change in Burma. His story is just beginning.



Mary, Khaing Oo Maung and Nisha at BHSOH.

Recently, Khaing Oo Maung tells me, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whom he regards with great reverence, sent a message to him through a friend, telling him not to return to Burma but to carry on with the all-important work of educating Burmese youth on the border. As the political situation unfolds, the exposure to “international ideas”, to languages and people will provide vision and skills that can be used to build a solid foundation for a new society. Another one of our partners reinforced that idea by telling me that while youth inside Burma have been developing excellent organizational skills since cyclone Nargis, youth in Thailand have learned much more about critical thinking and political analysis that is informed by knowledge of the outside world long denied youth inside. As these two groups receive training in democracy-building and learn to work together, they will need each other and each have their role to play.

Also sitting with us under the school awning, sharing visions, is Nisha, a young woman who began her career working in NGOs as a volunteer at BHSOH with the Mae Sot Education Project in 2004. She went on to work in World Education’s English Immersion Program at Umphium Refugee Camp and then as a

Burma advocate in Canada while doing graduate work, returning to the border last year to work for Youth Connect, a vocational education program for Burmese youth. Now she is beginning a research project for another organization that will investigate what repatriation to Burma might look like and what skills those who choose this path will need. It is Nisha, one of our very first project underlings, who drove me on the back of her motorbike down the very rough red dirt path through the verdant fields leading to BHSOH to see our old partner and friend today. Her life has also been inspired and transformed by Khaing Oo Maung's school. We seem to have come full circle; yet her story is still unfolding as well.

Who can measure the multiple impacts of an educational project such as Khaing Oo Maung's informal migrant school when, even years after its very modest beginnings in a dilapidated house outside of Mae Sot, we do not yet know the ends of the many stories connected to it? It has been an imperfect project, a school with a sometimes disorganized or chaotic air about it. Yet those of us who (like the amazing BHSOH students) have been touched by Khaing Oo Maung's vision of a free, ethnically and religiously inclusive democratic society and his deep and abiding belief in the youth of Burma have little doubt about its worth or accomplishments or about the need to continue our support for it.

Minmahaw Is on the Border to Stay

By Alexis Chouan, MSEP Volunteer

With so many of our efforts focused on Burma, it's not always easy to remember that we're actually in Thailand. Even at an immersion school like Minmahaw, where I teach and where students mostly speak in English even amongst themselves, the drive to talk about and understand Burma leads a large portion of the school spirit. For this reason, it came to me as a surprise to find out that Minmahaw was actually on the way to becoming a Thai foundation, through the work of John, one of the volunteer teachers who has been with the school since its early beginnings in 2007. That a Burmese migrant school can find Thai supporters to back it in becoming a recognized organization indicates to me both a change in Thai and Burmese perceptions of one another and a willingness to invest in the border proper as the site to continue this education initiative.

What does becoming a foundation mean for Minmahaw? At present, the best thing our students have in



Meaghan getting her wrist tied at a Karen festival.

form of documentation is an ID card that recognizes their presence on the border. But their status remains illegal and arrests by Thai police have happened. As a foundation, Minmahaw will grant better security for students by legitimizing their status in Thailand. The same is true for teachers, who currently come in on a tourist visa and go through the dance of the ever-famous border run to extend their stay and continue volunteering. The school may soon be able to offer its teachers working visas. With everyone in good standing with Thai authorities, Minmahaw will be able to run in a more peaceful atmosphere and focus its energy on the education it set out to give our students. It also means the school can be more vocal in Thailand and raise more funds in the country. The hope is to increase the school's budget enough to pay full salaries to the management staff, currently made up of former students who receive housing and a stipend, but not nearly enough for them not to move on elsewhere when opportunity calls. And once the situation is more stable than at present, there may even be more outcomes to being a foundation. On the long term, the size of the program could so much as double and with Thai board members, the organization could legally purchase buildings for the school.

Last month, John organized for many the key members of the foundation to come to Minmahaw and meet the students. The first one, Kavi Chongkittavorn, is a respected Thai journalist in Southeast Asia, involved in ASEAN and Burma issues,



Alexis and students at Minmahaw school.

among many fields. Kavi delivered an optimistic talk to the students about the future of Burma and how he expects the current reforms to place the country in a leadership position in the region, in a close future. Another notable member was Chalida Tajaroensuk, a small woman with big projects. Chalida is the director of the People's Empowerment Foundation and the country director of Forum Asia, two NGOs that act as channels between small grassroots organizations and large bodies such as ASEAN. Chalida was a very dynamic and enthusiastic person, who commented on the name the school will take as a foundation in Thailand: Education for Friendship. She assures us that in Thai, the name doesn't sound as corny or generic as it may in its English translation. Chalida indicates the Education part is a bit of a given, as we are a school, but the Friendship is not only for camaraderie among students, but the coming together of two people (and arguably more if you count all the ethnic minorities represented at Minmahaw) from different countries in one communal effort to rise to the task of finding Burma's place in the world of tomorrow.

With all the changes going on in Burma, is it really the right time to be anchoring a school in Thailand? The foundation members certainly think so. Firstly, there are a number of practical realities that make the idea of transferring Minmahaw across the border impossible. There are still too many ethnic disturbances, which present a threat to many of the students. Beyond security, the country's economy is far from running, which means the banking system is not ready to set up a school. The health care system will also need improvement before the school can consider shipping everyone home. Even if things are looking opportune for the future, Burma is not yet ready for a full return. Meanwhile, there is a lot of talk about creating a Thailand-Burma Special Economic Zone centered in Mae Sot as reforms go through and exchange between the two countries is encouraged. Minmahaw could participate in that movement by taking its legitimate status in Thailand. "This is a political school and it will stay a political school," says John, who gathered the contacts and resources to

make Minmahaw a foundation. The idea is not to slowly convert our migrant school into a Thai school, but to embrace our position on the border, which is as much a part of our roots and identity as a school than is the political activist spirit that lingers in and around our classrooms. What could the Minmahaw of tomorrow look like? Let's imagine a school that keeps its grassroots origins, while becoming a recognized voice in Burmese education, delivering quality education to its students who are globally aware of their position and what they need to do for their country. Idealistic? Yes. But in practical terms, this means that by staying on the border, Minmahaw can continue to explore alternative discourses and engage underrepresented populations with a broader world, instead of subscribing to the next majority.



What Future for Burmese Migrant Education?

By Mary Purkey, MSEP Coordinator
Sent from Mae Sot, Thailand, November 21, 2012

Here on the Thai-Burmese border, when talking about the seemingly positive developments in Burma, measured optimism runs square into a deep sense that a story is being spun by the Burmese government. It is a story driven by an understanding that the generals can create a parliament, free political prisoners, give Daw Aung San Suu Kyi some scope to advocate for change and in the process win the approval of Western governments, business interests and most recently the World Bank while in fact, on the ground, little is changing for the ordinary Burmese person. Some grim realities persist: massive corruption and collusion between ex-generals and Chinese business, land confiscations, forced recruitment in ethnic states where conflict is still going on, a weak economy and health and education systems and of course the recent Buddhist-Muslim violence in Rakhine State. In view of these realities, it is difficult for even the Burmese in Thailand, not to mention the rest of us, to assess the character, extent and impact of change happening in the country.



Another long-time partner, Daw Htet Htet Aung.

Among Karen refugees in Thailand, there is talk of repatriation but no certainty regarding what those who choose to repatriate might do upon return or what land they would occupy (most were farmers in their former lives). To many, the camps have become home, and too much uncertainty lies on the other side. Some fear that repatriation simply masks the Burmese government's plan to create a cheap labour force for a new "free trade zone" on the Burmese side of the border. For migrant workers, little motivation to return exists since the economic situation on the Thai side of the border is so much better than that in Burma. Nonetheless, Burmese people are moving back and forth across the border much more freely than in past years, and the fear of violence has abated enough to inspire some to contemplate the possibility of return, if not tomorrow, perhaps in a few years. For donors and big NGOs, the border has grown a bit old; Burma is "sexy" and many are increasingly, if prematurely, shifting their focus there. However, the dominant conclusion among the Burmese seems to be: wait and see.

In this shifting context, informal education programs for migrant and refugee youth in Thailand are developing in directions that could potentially give Burmese youth more security and more choices with regard to their futures. Migrant learning centres (the term used in Thailand for schools created by displaced Burmese educators for Burmese youth) are at a point where they need and want to evolve beyond the informality of the past, to find ways to offer their students the kind of "legitimacy" that state-run education systems possess. Of foremost importance will be their ability to enable their students to obtain government approved school certificates – whether in Thailand or in Burma.

The Thai government has proposed a number of paths by which they can potentially accomplish this goal in the coming years. Theoretically, learning centres that can obtain the support of a foundation can become bona fide Thai private schools. Thai foundations can own land and thus are in a position to sponsor schools. In this case 70% of the curriculum must be Thai but 30% may be Burmese (or other). Obviously, obtaining the support of a foundation is no simple task, and only those schools that demonstrate that they are operating at a fairly sophisticated level are likely to qualify. Another option is what has been called a "school within a school" whereby children in lower levels of learning centres may prepare for and take Thai school exams in the learning centre itself (with the help of Thai teachers) and then, in grade four, make a transition into a Thai school. This approach involves collaboration between local Thai schools and learning centres. However, the cost is borne by the Burmese. This week it was announced that under new legislation migrant learning centres will be able to register and under certain conditions receive Thai government financial support. They will have to have Thai headmasters, follow Thai curriculum and institute some other new policies with regard to school organization, but their students will be able to receive Thai school certificates. In all of these cases, the objective is to give Burmese students access to Thai secondary school certification and to the legal identity that accompanies it. In reality, at present, few migrant schools are in a position to



Meaghan makes sure no one's falling behind.

pursue these alternatives but some are hopeful that they may be in the future. Meanwhile, learning centres may also be registered simply as migrant learning centres. As such, they will be allowed to exist, but will not receive the same support or be able to issue Thai school certificates.

In fact, Burmese children may attend Thai schools. During their first year, they must pay a fee, but thereafter, they are receive a "permanent code" that enables them eventually to obtain certificates and access higher education. Some well-to-and educationally enlightened Burmese migrants have taken advantage of this option. Of course, the curriculum is Thai, and many Burmese migrant parents, especially those who lack education themselves, are often suspicious of the Thai system. They fear, with some justice, that their children will face some discrimination and lose their connection to their own culture. Most prefer the Burmese curriculum used in the migrant learning centres. Nonetheless, the Burmese children who have been able to follow this path are generally happy.

A final, completely different approach is also being pursued in a new pilot program initiated only in the last months by the Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (BMWEC) in collaboration with Thai and Burmese governments. Seventy migrant students have been chosen to prepare for and to take the Burmese secondary school matriculation exam in Burma this coming March. In order to go to Burma to take the exam, the participating students are going to be issued Burmese identity papers which may be the most valuable result of this exercise. No one knows how the migrant school youth will fare on the exams. Some regard the preparation of students to take Burmese exams, with their emphasis on rote learning, as a regressive step. However controversial and whatever the uncertain outcomes or the motivation behind the project, it could nonetheless turn out to be a first step toward possible reintegration of these youth into their own country, and if they are successful, it could also give them access to university programs in other countries.

Perhaps the key points to be made are that the migrant education situation in Thailand is not static and that the “solutions” being considered are less driven by desperation than in the past. Migrant educators have been thinking creatively and working with Thai local school authorities and Ministry of Education (and now possibly even the Burmese) with an eye to the future. They would like migrant learning centres to be more sustainable. Everyone knows that migrant youth will not go away anytime soon and accepts that they have a right to education. Some believe that the proposals for development are politically motivated and linked to developments in ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations) with respect to regularization of migrant labour in what is expected to become an important “special economic zone” in coming years. However, their immediate impact on migrant youth is, potentially at least, to create both identity and choice.

Traveling in Mae Hong Son last week, I encountered the Na Soi Community Learning Centre. It does not refer to itself as a “migrant” centre even though it was created to serve displaced Burmese youth. Currently, its three year senior program includes local Thais as well as Burmese, and it has a vibrant and warm relationship with the Ban Na Soi village (where it is located) that has allowed it to give students both its own certificate and a Thai certificate that recognizes students who have completed its three-year program. Its founder, Kyaw Hla Sein is a visionary who embraces the importance of global cooperation and environmental sustainability and wants the Na Soi Learning Centre to embody and express both (beginning with the bricks made from local mud of which the buildings are built). Perhaps this somewhat primitive looking but very sophisticated school is a model for learning centres in the coming years.

In this context the role of the international donor community is not to withdraw from the border but to enable those working for education to evolve in ways that create legal identity and choices. At present, in the education sector at least, there are more resources and capacity in Thailand to help Burmese youth than there are in Burma. For now at least, more can be accomplished with respect to developing the leadership abilities and skills of Burmese youth in Thailand than in Burma. With Burma’s future lying in the hands of this generation, let us hope that the West does not forget them.

Note: As a corollary to the above developments, perhaps because of the economic development expected in the region in the coming years, the teaching of English seems to have only grown in importance. Both Thai and Burmese educators seek to encourage “multi-lingualism” among their youth. In one project, development of a proposed migrant hospital, the Thai Ministry of Education is recruiting students from the migrant schools because of their greater knowledge of English, Thai and Burmese. From those who succeed in a basic training of 150 students, 75 will be selected to participate in a nursing program. While Thai and Burmese remain the key languages for communication along the border, English is here, as everywhere, the language of international communication and opportunity.



For the last decade, many highly talented Burmese artists have displayed their works at a small gallery in Mae Sot called the Borderline Collective. MSEP has brought a collection of the paintings produced by these artists to Canada for future exhibition and to encourage recognition of and support for the Burmese artistic community. Paintings may also be had for suggested donations to our project. If you would like to see a catalogue of these works, please email Mary Purkey at marypurkey@gmail.com.

Who we are and what we do

The Mae Sot Education Project (MSEP) is a community project based on the campus of Bishop’s University and Champlain College – Lennoxville in 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 our campus to go to Mae Sot for 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.

The Project Committee is made up of members of the community, faculty from Bishop’s and Champlain, and former youth volunteers with the project. Currently, members are: Avril Aitken, Ron Bishop, Carinne Bevan, Catherine Isely, Sunny Lau, Anabel Pinero, Mary Purkey, Garry Retzleff, and Marjorie Retzleff, as well as former volunteers Barbara Rowell (2005), Emily Prangle Desormeaux (2009) and Megan Irving (2011). Skylar Lepoidevin has left Canada to work for World Education at Umphium Mai Refugee Camp in Thailand.