



Mae Sot Education Project

Our School Partners in the post-Covid Era

All of our partner schools in Mae Sot serve the needs of children of migrant workers and people driven across the border by repression, conflict and economic hardship in Myanmar. All open their doors to children of all religions and ethnicities. Funding for the schools has come from a variety of sources. Because of Covid-19, one of our original partners has had to close her school, Hsa Mu Htaw. During the last several years, many donors have turned their attention elsewhere, and in the face of the pandemic, new problems have arisen. Migrant learning centres face constant difficulties finding sufficient funds to carry on with their work.

Note: The photos included in this document are from pre-Covid years and numbers for students and staff will need to be updated in 2021.

The Boarding High School for Orphans and Helpless Youth (BHSOH) is located in the countryside outside Mae Pa, near Mae Sot. It was founded in 1993 by U Khaing Oo Maung, an educator and democracy activist of the 1962 generation. Along with providing primary and secondary education, BHSOH boards and cares for orphans and neglected children. One of its challenges is to find educational options for students who have finished its G1-to-G10 program. To meet their needs, it prepares a small group of students for GED programs, offers a Kor Sor Nor (Thai Nonformal Education) program to help students who wish to transition into the Thai education system and is also the home of the Youth Connect Life Skills program. Prior to Covid closures, BHSOH served 320 children 35 of whom lived at the school. During the pandemic, it is one of the schools that has managed to do some online teaching. In addition, a volunteer in our community has done a weekly Zoom class in English enrichment for a group of older students. The school's work is overseen by a School Management Committee, and its core funding comes from Child's Dream and a Canadian donor (through MSEP).



School founder U Khaing Oo Maung with principal Naw Naw



Lunchtime!



Transportation – essential for students at BHSOH



MSEP volunteer helping post-10 students



A classroom



School grounds

Hsa Thoo Ley Learning Centre and Orphanage is situated on the outskirts of Mae Sot. It was founded in 1999 by Karen leader Naw Paw Ray as a school for children of migrant workers under the umbrella of BMWEC (Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee). The largest of the migrant learning centres in Mae Sot, it is divided into three “schools” (pre-school, primary and secondary) and has more than 800 students (240 in the secondary program), including more than 100 boarding students, and a teaching staff of 42. It has a large campus with a number of buildings built with funding from international NGOs including a boarding house, nursery and housing for some of the faculty in addition to classrooms, office space, a library and an auditorium. In the last years it has worked closely with the Myanmar Department of Education as well as the Thai government and has developed a program to prepare older students to take matriculation examinations in Myanmar. Teacher recruitment and funding for operating costs and salaries are huge challenges for such a large school. It relies on international donors and increasingly on parents for basic funds. MSEP contributes a small amount.



One of the school buildings



Headmistress Hsa Eh with Naw Paw Ray



Students doing traditional Karen dancing



Preparation for Burmese matriculation exams



A library of donated books



Large classes are the norm....



The importance of language

What one sees on migrant learning centre walls...



The importance of culture



The importance of the future

Hle Bee Learning Centre, situated in the heart of Mae Sot, was started in 1999 by headmistress Naw Tha Zin Htay Naing, a Mon woman who taught for many years in Burma/Myanmar. Over the years the school has had to adapt and rebuild, as some of the land it occupied was reclaimed by a Thai owner, and school buildings were destroyed in the process. Nonetheless, it has grown and now has a sizable building for more than 200 students in primary grades (nursery to grade 6) and 13 teachers. Sadly, there is no longer any outdoor playground area for children. As with other learning centres, one of its main challenges is retaining teachers. In the current climate, migrant learning centre teachers can often find more remunerative employment in other sectors. The border closure during Covid adds to this problem. Hle Bee is increasingly focused on helping students prepare for and pass the grade 4 Myanmar exams. However, only a minority choose to return to Myanmar. Most school funding comes from an Italian donor and MSEP.



Tha Zin, school founder and headmistress



A challenging environment!



Efforts to create green spaces



Noisy open classrooms!



MSEP volunteer with students



Children at work

Our Role in the Migrant Education Community

How does the assistance in the teaching of English provided by *Mae Sot Education Project* volunteers fit into the educational objectives of the migrant education community? English has become *the* global language. For the most precocious youth, it will open doors to higher educational opportunities that are otherwise simply unavailable to them. For others, it may be of lesser value but will lead to job opportunities, if only in Mae Sot or upon return to Myanmar. It is a service we can offer which is highly valued by the Burmese educational community in creating its own future. However, for our project, English teaching is *not* the primary objective. We see the teaching of English as a vehicle for opening a window on the world for Burmese children and also for creating bonds between volunteers and children that prove enriching on both sides. In addition, volunteers provide other kinds of pedagogical support in other subject areas as well as engaging in extra-curricular enrichment activities many of which are made possible through shared language. It is the human – both intellectual and emotional – connections forged through this whole constellation of activities that give our project its value to our partners. During Covid-19, the importance of these connections has only increased. MSEP has undertaken a number of long-distance “Zooming in English” mini-courses with a group of older students (who use their phones to communicate), but we look forward to the time when we can be together as partners and as friends.



Min-gala-ba! Cè-zù tin-ba deh!

Parami Learning Centre began in a small house but moved in 2010 to a large piece of land – realizing the dream of the school organizers to make the school more self-sustaining through development of gardening and fish pond projects and to build a vocational education program for students who have outgrown its K to G10 program. It houses a Kor Sor Nor (Thai Nonformal Education or NFE) program. There are about 489 students ranging in age from 4 to 15 years of age and 27 teachers. Parami also has a Montessori preschool program and recently started a Myanmar-based Nonformal Education (NFE) program for students hoping to reintegrate into the Myanmar education system. 10 children live at the school because of difficult family situations. Many teachers also live at the school. The school's biggest challenge is that its rent has quadrupled in 2018, and it has no source of funding sufficient to solve that problem. Help Without Frontiers (HWF) provides partial funding for operational costs (including transportation and salaries for teachers). MSEP and a number of other organizations also help.



The Parami administration: Htwe Nge, Megan Irving (former MSEP volunteer) and July Moe



Parami students practice a new dance after school



MSEP Volunteer with students at Parami



A student learning to sew



The dormitory for boarding students



The garden project



The fish pond



The Montessori room



The library



A typical class

Pyo Khinn Learning Centre, our newest partner school, was started in 1999 by Muslim headmaster U Thein Tun. The school has 7 teachers, 1 staff and 103 students in grades 1-5. Most are Muslim and live in an extremely poor corner of Mae Sot. Some families contribute to school funds; most cannot. Pyo Khinn uses a Burmese curriculum but has recently introduced a Kor Sor Nor (Thai Nonformal Education) program in which 11 students are enrolled. Although Muslim in character, the school teaches about all the different religions of Myanmar. Given the situation for Muslims in Myanmar, there is little prospect of these children returning there soon. The school's main concern is to keep children coming to school at present. The drop-out rate is fairly high because of the poverty these families face. It operates with few resources in a small space that often needs repairs. Its core funding comes from Child's Dream. MSEP also donates to help cover smaller expenses (like school lunch!).



Pyo Khinn from the street



Children sweep the small school yard



School lunchtime.



A Pyo Khinn classroom



MSEP Volunteer with teaching team



An outdoor class – using every available space



Daw Htet Htet Aung with MSEP volunteer

Hsa Mu Htw Learning Centre – now closed due to Covid-19

One of our first friends in Mae Sot was the educator, Daw Htet Htet Aung. A number of years ago, she took responsibility for helping a very poor primary school that was in need of her organizational skills. Under her leadership, the school blossomed. It served more than 200 children ranging in age from 3 to 13 years and had 9 teachers. Along with a primary



Myanmar school program (nursery through grade 6), based largely on the curriculum, it had a Montessori preschool program and a dormitory for boarding students. A mushroom growing project, initiated by another Canadian NGO, provided a small income that Daw Htet Htet Aung allowed the children to administer. In addition, the children undertook handicraft projects to try to raise funds for their school. Funding was always precarious. A number of organizations including MSEP, Safe Child Thailand and TDH Netherlands as well as individual donors helped but Covid left Daw Htet Htet Aung trapped in Myanmar, and a critical donor organization decided that it could not continue to pay the rent. The closing of the school is a big loss for the migrant education community.



Migrant students share some visions of world peace in their art.



A Note on Migrant Education

There are currently 61 migrant schools or “learning centres” with about 700 teachers in Tak province where Mae Sot is located. They serve about 14,000 children (out of the 25-40,000 migrant children in Tak). Some offer primary grades only while others offer either secondary only or the entire ten grades, depending on their capacity. A few “LCs” offer “post-10” vocational or GED (General Education Diploma) programs for older youth. The schools vary considerably in size and in available resources, depending on funding from foreign donors, networking within the educational community, etc.

In recent years, Burmese educators have tried to standardize curriculum so that children moving from one school to another have similar experiences. This standardization relies heavily on the use of the Myanmar curriculum. At the same time, they have adapted their curriculum to meet the Thai Ministry of Education requirement that they offer Thai language. Thus migrant children often study three and sometimes four (Burmese, Karen, Thai and English) languages. Finally, conscious of the inadequacy of traditional Burmese education to meet the needs of people living in a 21st century democratic society, some schools have tried to integrate critical thinking pedagogy into their teaching, leading to development of curricula for new subject areas such as environment studies, social studies, and Burmese culture, history and politics in addition to traditional disciplines such as language, math, art, and natural sciences. Teaching in all subject areas depends on the availability of trained teachers and materials, both of which are always in short supply. Schools rely heavily on volunteer teachers to fill gaps in the curriculum. Until its departure from Mae Sot in 2017, World Education was instrumental in developing curriculum and in providing teacher training. With its departure, learning centres have felt the loss of an important source of pedagogical support. Since 2012 when discussion of possible return to Burma for at least some students began, there has been some collaboration with the Myanmar Ministry of Education; the migrant education community has worked to strengthen older students’ ability to succeed in the Burmese system and therefore now offers Burmese matriculation exams. However, the recent coup in Myanmar has definitely put these initiatives in jeopardy. At the same time, for those who see their future in Thailand, efforts are being made to provide children with the language and general knowledge needed to gain access to the Thai educational system. Funding is needed to facilitate both these efforts.

The Impact of Covid-19

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, The Thai government closed the border between Myanmar and Thailand in 2020. It also required migrant learning centres to close to students temporarily. Migrant educators did not want the children in their community to spend a year out of school. Thus they worked overtime to create a program of home-based Learning (HBL) activities and to prepare teachers to travel to villages and other settings where migrants live to deliver lessons. A number of NGOs (including MSEP) as well as UNICEF provided financial support both for HBL and for sanitation equipment needed for the time when schools would be allowed to open. As of writing, the situation has not changed, and in fact, the combination of the pandemic and the coup in Myanmar have increased the instability, separation from family and insecurity with which people in the migrant community have to live.