

Border patrol police schools provide learning opportunities for children in isolated vicinities

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Thongpong Sa-ardchai, an employee of the Thong Pha Phum National Park, said with deep gratification that her life would never be as good as it is today if the border patrol police school did not exist.



Students assemble in the early morning for the national anthem and to take part in the daily outdoor meeting at Wijit Witthayakarn Border Patrol Police School in Thong Pha Phum district, Kanchanaburi province. On Tuesdays, students wear their colourful native costumes and bring their own cups daily to receive free milk provided by the school.

Ms Thongpong was born to a Burmese-Mon family in Ban Epoo (Epoo village). With limited access to education, just like many other stateless children in remote areas, she was lucky enough to be able to enrol at Wijit Witthayakarn Border Patrol Police School, the central education institution for Ban Epoo and surrounding communities, located near the Thai-Burmese border.

School for all

Established in 1956, Wijit Witthayakarn Border Patrol Police School is located 800 metres above sea level in a small valley in the Tenasserim mountain range, a three-hour drive from the provincial city of Kanchanaburi province and a few kilometres away from the national park's headquarters where Ms Thongpong works.

Ninety percent of students are non-Thais, according to Pol Cpl Manop Promfa or Kru Manop (kru means teacher in Thai), who has been a teacher at the school for nine years. Only about 10 percent of the student body are Thais and more than 50 percent are Burmese. The remainder are Mon, Karen and Nepalese descendants.

Many of these foreign pupils are children born to people who flocked to the area during the heyday of mining decades ago. As the mines closed down, large numbers of foreign workers and fortune-hunters lost their jobs, and they eventually took up permanent residence in the area.

"Border patrol police (BPP) schools provide education opportunities for both Thai and stateless children," Ms Thongpong said. When I was young, "children without identification

papers could not enrol in normal state schools. However, BPP schools accepted all the children and also found ways to get identification documents for them," she recollected.

Border patrol police schools are under the jurisdiction of the Border Patrol Police Bureau, which is supervised by the Royal Thai Police.

Education and security

For over 50 years, BPP schools have been educational sanctuaries for underprivileged children in areas of Thailand that are as remote as, and in many instances even more far-flung than, Ban Epoo.

"Initially, the BPP and BPP airborne units, who were deployed in the northern mountainous areas that were inhabited by hill tribes and minorities, were of the view that if such faraway children were not taught the Thai language, it would be very hard to communicate with them and make them feel and think like Thai citizens," said Pol Lt Gen Kriangsak Suriyo, commissioner of the BPP Bureau, explaining the reason behind the creation of BPP schools.

In 1956, the first BPP school was inaugurated in Chiang Rai province's Chiang Khong district, which is located near the Thai-Burmese-Lao border. Thereafter, 721 schools were founded. Today, there remain only 182 schools, as some schools have been closed and many were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Office of the Basic Education Commission (Obec).

In the old days, the focus of such schools was to teach the Thai language and act as intelligence-gathering centres for homeland security-related purposes.

Nowadays, besides maintaining security and providing standardised education opportunities to the children, the schools also aim at cultivating a better quality of life and sustainable development for the residents in the territories concerned, by applying His Majesty the King's sufficiency-economy philosophy, according to Pol Lt Gen Kriangsak.

Border patrol police schools currently accommodate over 26,000 students and 1,700 teachers. They operate mostly at the kindergarten and primary levels - preschool through Prathom 6 (Grade 6) - and use the curriculum contained in the Basic Education Act. Their motto is "Building Wisdom, Improving the Quality of Life, and Enhancing Security".

"We try our best to help the people who live in areas near the borders of Thailand to speak and understand the Thai language and to benefit from the compulsory education laws as well as move up to a better quality of life," Pol Lt Gen Kriangsak emphasized.

Police officers-cum-teachers

In the past, the teachers at these schools were solely front-line BPP officers whose qualifications and personalities matched the requirements sought and who appeared to also have teaching abilities, according to Pol Lt Gen Kriangsak. In other words, police officers were trained to become professional teachers.

Nowadays, the teachers come from diverse backgrounds, but nearly all of them started off as BPP officers.

Many teachers are now recruited via the Gurudhayadha programme, which allows Thai alumni of BPP schools, who have obtained a high school diploma, to take an entrance exam to become BPP officers, and if successful, they may be assigned to teach at BPP schools.

These teachers are required to perform tasks similar to those carried out by front-line officers, in addition to their teaching responsibilities. Kru Manop and his wife are examples of those who entered the profession through the Gurudhayadha programme.



Kru Manop and his Prathom 6 (Grade 6) class

After passing the exam, the successful candidates have to undergo a four-month police training course and a seven-month teacher-training stint before they are assigned to the schools in need of instructors, which are usually situated in their home districts.

"This is like having senior students returning to teach their juniors. It also helps foster effective communication and understanding among teachers, students and the communities," Pol Lt Gen Kriangsak said, adding that the bureau will reduce the number of teachers who have no degrees and replace them with police officer-teachers who have degrees and have also participated in the Gurudhayadha programme, he said.

Over 100 applicants apply in response to the programme's call each year.

Overview of programmes

"Good morning, teacher. How are you today?" shouted students in English during the morning flag line-up, after they sang the national anthem.

"I'm fine, thank you. And you?" Kru Manop replied. This simple English dialogue is a daily routine at Wijit Witthayakarn BPP School, one of the many exercises to familiarise students with English in today's globalised world.

The greetings mark the beginning of the daily outdoor "meeting" at which Kru Manop and his colleagues teach and discuss topics ranging from the students' daily lessons to maintaining the school premises.

Students under his charge study eight subjects conforming to the standard curriculum of the Ministry of Education, with special emphasis on the Thai language and mathematics, according to Kru Manop. In the other BPP schools, the emphasis may vary, depending on the schools' locations, their environment and students' demographics, he said.

The school has nearly 120 students, six teachers and a couple of local volunteers, and it covers the levels from preschool to Prathom 6 (Grade 6). The term "preschool" here does not apply to very young children only, but also to the older students who are starting school for

the first time and, therefore, have never been exposed to formal instruction in the process of acquiring academic knowledge. "We've got a 12-year-old student studying at the preschool level," said Kru Manop.

In particular, the preschool classes concentrate on teaching the Thai language as it is the medium of instruction at all levels.

The preschool classes are under the responsibility of the local volunteers, who can communicate by using the requisite native languages with students for whom Thai is the second or third language.

Each homeroom teacher is responsible for a grade and has to teach all the subjects assigned to that grade.

"Teaching the English language is still a great burden for most teachers," said Kru Manop. "It would be better if we could have a teacher who is specialised in teaching English to the pupils at all the levels," he said.

In addition to adhering to the academic syllabus, teachers and students need to carry out eight initiatives originated by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. These aim to create a better quality of life for the students. Every BPP school is required to follow these operating guidelines.

Wijit Witthayakarn BPP School has its own small livestock shed, a fish pond, a mushroom farm and a vegetable garden. All these "production facilities" are part of the Agriculture for School Lunch project, which seeks to reduce food expenses and to teach students viable farming skills.

The other initiatives include Improvement of Educational Quality, Vocational Training, Cooperative Promotion, Conservation of Natural Resources and Environment, Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders, Higher Education for Children under the Patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, and Promotion of Maternal and Child Nutrition and Health in Remote Areas.

Barrier to overcome

Many BPP schools are still struggling to achieve the prescribed standards of education quality assurance. The last random evaluation by the Office of National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (Onesqa) reveals that only a few schools comply with the minimum standards.

The quality of teachers may be a factor behind that finding, explained Pol Lt Gen Kriangsak. Given that many schools are now under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and have teachers with better academic backgrounds, BPP schools may be inferior in this aspect.

"We are supporting and encouraging more teachers to get their bachelor's and master's degrees," Pol Lt Gen Kriangsak said. Currently, nine teachers have obtained their master's degree and another 15 are in the process of getting theirs. A large number of the teachers hold a bachelor's degree.

The bureau conducts teacher-training courses annually as well as invite Onesqa to hold seminars for teachers and management teams to enable them to understand more about the assessment process.

Pol Lt Gen Kriangsak commented that the bureau is seeking cooperation from local government offices to assist in developing and improving the schools in the outlying areas while also trying to transfer those schools over to Obec, which can provide them with more professional teachers and facilities.

Eyeing a better future

Fortunately, Wijit Witthayakarn BPP School receives welcome and continuous support from outside parties, such as volunteer groups, alumni or even tourists who happen to drop by the school on their way to Pilok Mine, a famous tourist destination known for its scenery and old mines. Nonetheless, many schools are still behind in terms of teaching and learning facilities and equipment, as well as uniforms, especially shoes.

"I would like the public and private sectors to see the importance of education for these children and youths in remote areas and to help them to acquire equal education opportunities, so that we can deploy these human resources in the development of our nation," said Pol Lt Gen Kriangsak.

"Children are like creepers, they can creep in any direction. If we want them to become solid trees, we have to shape them," said Ms Thongpong. Border patrol police schools are among the shapers. Like other education institutions, they are shaping Thailand by guiding children in the right direction.

For more information about border patrol police schools, visit <http://tinyurl.com/mvqsl9> or call 02-279-9520 ext 336 or 353.