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*This article illustrates both the benefits and the problems associated with education policy as it affects minority children.*

## **Literacy has no nationality**

### ***The education of stateless children along the Thai-Burmese border remains a problem in search of a solution***

**Story and photos by PURICH TRIVITAYAKHUN - TAK**

There are 580km of border between Thailand and Burma in Tak, a province in northern Thailand. Immigrants, some of whom are refugees, have been settling in Tak for decades. Many generations have since been born on Thai soil. Many of these immigrants, as well as their children, remain stateless - not recognised as a citizen of any country.

This article explores education opportunities for these stateless children and how the government is trying to ensure that they receive proper and standard education.

"It is the principal duty of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to ensure that all children, regardless of nationality, who live in Thailand are given equal learning opportunities," says Deputy Minister of Education Chaiwuti Bannawat.

#### Learning centres

"There are no Thai students," Wichuda Daengthoen responds quickly after being asked for the number of Thai students in Namtok School. "Most of the students here are the offspring of immigrants who work in the agricultural industry," she says.

Wichuda is a Thai-language instructor and the only Thai teacher in Namtok School, which is located at the centre of the Phop Phra cultivation area.

The moderate temperatures and the fertile ground present in Phop Phra, a Thai-Burmese-border district about 120km west of Tak provincial city, make it and its surrounding areas one of Thailand's largest vegetable and flower suppliers. Crops and fruits in this region are produced by a large number of foreign immigrants.

She says that many students return home to help their parents in the fields after they graduate from the school.

Currently, Namtok School hosts 252 students and 10 teachers and has classes

from Anuban to Prathom 6 (kindergarten to Grade 6). Its student body comprises Burmese, Karen, Mon and other ethnic minorities, but no Thais. Other than the Thai-language class, all subjects are taught in Burmese and English.

Even though the name Namtok School is written on a small wooden board in front of the building, this establishment is actually a learning centre.

In Thailand, around 60,000 stateless children are enrolled in private and public schools. At the same time, more than 100,000 other students with the same political status are being educated in learning centres similar to Namtok School and schools located in shelter areas, which are mostly run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scattered along the Thai-Burmese border.

In Tak province alone, there are 61 registered learning centres and several unregistered similar establishments. The registered centres are hosts to about 10,800 students and 625 teachers. Nearly all of the students and teachers are foreigners and ethnic minorities.

Tak Educational Service Area Office 2 (Tak ESAO 2) has joined hands with the World Education Consortium to develop a curriculum for science and mathematics that have been translated into the Burmese and Karen languages and based on Thailand's 2001 Curriculum for Basic Education for Prathom 1 to 3 (Grades 1 to 3). Also, the consortium developed a simplified course for teachers to use when teaching the Thai language.

### Conflicts and solutions

Although several learning centres are registered, Namtok School for instance, and are thus under the collaborative supervision of the government and NGOs, the majority of them continue operating as rogue centres, making it difficult to know the content of their teaching ideology or its impact on the students.

"While we commend the learning centres for their meritorious actions in looking after the interests of the students, more problems may arise if we continue to let them run in different directions as we don't know what they are teaching the students," comments Mr Chaiwuti, adding that letting these centres operate unregulated might also have serious effects on national security as well as on the students themselves.

According to the minister, an existing problem with learning centres is that they have divergent standards and curricula. Moreover, they tend to have many volunteer teachers who entered the country illegally. Additionally, there is a lack of continuity in the learning process of many students due to high student turnover rates that occur when their parents relocate.

Finally, many of the centres do not provide lessons on the Thai language, Thai

culture and Thai laws. Knowledge of these subjects is vital for students planning to remain in Thailand.

"These issues need to be addressed by all government agencies. It is also important that the private sector and NGOs participate in solving the problems," Mr Chaiwuti says.

He suggests that learning centres that have potential to meet the prescribed standards be promoted to the level of private education institutions. Once they are upgraded, they will be eligible to benefit from the government's free education policy.

As for the rest of the centres, the ministry is drafting a Prime Minister's Office regulation to control and assist learning centres to enable them to deliver a national-standard curriculum. It is likely to be presented to the Cabinet for consideration soon, according to Mr Chai-wuti.

The regulation will enable the establishment of provincial committees that can supervise and control the centres.

The long-term challenges, as far as providing a national-standard education to all stateless children is concerned, says the minister, is solving the problem of student turnover and the issuance of professional licences to volunteer teachers who enter the country illegally. This is not permitted under prevailing laws. It is also important to put in place a national standard curriculum for use in learning centres attended by stateless children, he adds.

#### 'School within a School'

An example of successful delivery of education to stateless children, an approach that deserves to be applied at other learning centres, can be seen at Ban Tha Ard School, located a few kilometres north of Mae Sot, a large district along the Thai-Burmese border, which is 80km west of the provincial city. The school is just a few steps away from the border, represented by the Moei River.

The school is under the jurisdiction of Obec (Office of the Basic Education Commission) and hosts 426 students and 18 teachers. Only 50 of the students are Thai. The rest are Burmese, Mon, Karen and other ethnic minorities.

This year, Ban Tha Ard School started its "School within a School" project, under which the school invites teachers and students from other learning centres to teach and study in Ban Tha Ard School. The school has signed a memorandum of understanding with five learning centres in nearby areas.

"We want to provide learning opportunities, not only for Thai students, to be educated in a school. More importantly, with this system, we can exercise close

supervision and instil gratitude towards Thailand, the monarchy, and Thai norms," says Sutep Thamajak, the school's director.

According to Mr Sutep, the contracted learning centres bring an additional 351 rotating students to be taught in the school. Ban Tha Ard School delivers the Thai and mathematics lessons, while the other subjects are delivered by teachers from the associate education facilities.

Two other schools under the jurisdiction of Tak ESAO 2 have adopted the "School within a School" concept. They are Ban Mae Pa Nua School and Ban Mae Tao School. Education sans borders

One interesting fact about Ban Tha Ard School is that 40 students cross the Moei River from Burma each day to study at the school.

The free-education policy of the MOE appears to be luring students from the neighbouring country to flock into Thai schools. However, Mr Chaiwuti argues that this school is an unusual case as it is very close to the border and that when one looks at the history of the area, the people of the two countries have always been living as sisters and brothers.

"Previously, the parents of the 40 students worked in Thailand. They are so impressed by our education system and the Thai people that they have decided to send their children to this Thai school even though they have returned to their home country," explains Mr Sutep.

"I don't have to pay any tuition fees. Besides, I get a free lunch every school day," says Wallapa Norcheu, a Prathom 5 (Grade 5) student who travels back and forth between Burma and the school.

#### NGO support

Namtok School is one of 37 registered learning centres run by the Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (BMWEC). The organisation provides education opportunities to nearly 8,000 stateless children through its learning centres.

Paw Ray Rattanachairuedi, chair-person of the BMWEC, agrees to have her centres regulated by the Thai government.

She accepts the notion that quality learning centres should be promoted to private schools, while allowing the rest of the learning centres to continue to exist under the joint supervision of the government and her organisation.

"My preference is for 60 percent of the centres managing their own teaching and learning matters and the remaining 40 percent to be under the responsibility of

Obec," comments Ms Paw Ray.

Her learning centres hosts approximately 463 teachers, of which approximately 50 are Thai. She disclosed that there is still a shortage of Thai teachers.

To improve the situation, she would like the government to provide more Thai teachers, arrange teacher-training programmes and grant financial assistance once her centres are regulated.

Currently, her teachers are paid 3,000 to 5,000 baht each month according to their seniority.

She says that the BMWEC receives support from organisations in the US and UK, but due to the economic downturn, some of the organisations have had to reduce their donations.

"Last year, the grant for students was 1,000 baht per head per year, but this year the amount has been reduced to 600 baht," the chairperson bemoans. Some parents contribute a 50-to-100-baht fee per student per year in the smaller centres, and up to 500 baht per student per year in the larger centres.

Ultimately, whether or not stateless children will receive a standard education depends on whether the so-far unauthorised learning centres are upgraded and recognised by the MOE as proper schools so as to receive the benefits of the collaboration between the government, the private sector and related entities.