



Education Diary
September 2020 edition

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Flowers that bloom in a storm; 5 Migrant schools against all odds

Education is a necessary path every child must take in growing up. It teaches young, impressionable children about the wider world they are a part of and the skills needed to tackle the coming challenges in life. However, not every child, especially children living in underdeveloped or politically unstable regions, is fortunate enough to be able to afford education, even in this age of globalization. This reality applies to children from our country Myanmar or Burma, where decades of civil unrest and ethnic conflict have resulted in a constant stream of migrants and refugees across the world, but particularly across the Myanmar/Burma - Thailand border.

As if our greatest strength as human beings was our ability to defy the odds, many people along this border have taken up the responsibility and done their best to pass down knowledge to the new generation with whatever materials are available. Migrant education began as a grassroots movement with informal gatherings to teach children to read and write, the basics of education. As time went on, international eyes took notice of these actions. Some organizations and donors began to support them materially, and the movement began to grow. Eventually, these education centers gained a strong enough material foundation to be recognized collectively as legitimate educational entities by the authorities of their respective countries.

Today, around Mae Sot in Tak Province, Thailand, there are more than 64 migrant learning centres that are unofficially recognized by the local government (which is to say that they were allowed to open as "learning centres", through agreements with the local government, but not as "official schools"). Selfless teachers who make sacrifices to deliver education are the most important part of this education project. However, we cannot forget the role of foreign material support in allowing these small informal gatherings to grow into full-fledged, if not official, schools. At the same time, we need to realize that this support has not always been constant. Through these years, there have been ups and downs. Years were passed without any funding for some of the migrant learning centres.

Right now in the wake of a global pandemic that has swept across the world, times are harder than ever. Learning centres already struggling with financial issues have found themselves walking on a tight rope, struggling to keep afloat, fearful of having to shut down, which would be a devastating blow to the children in migrant area. Having already been through thick and thin, many schools have done whatever is in their power to ensure the education of children continues even during COVID. Among those struggling valiantly against odds are migrant learning centres like Champion, Sunset, Future Garden, Muditar and Islam Bang Roong.



Islam Bang Roong is a night school that runs classes from 5 to 8 pm. It has 57 students between Kindergarten and 3rd grade and two teachers. It was established with encouragement from Naw Paw Ray, the chairperson of Burmese Migrant Workers' Education Committee (BMWEC) in 2004-2005 with only 15 students and one teacher. Naw Paw Ray also gave the needed supplies and the school name (after the street it is on). It was formerly under the management of a school head who was resettled but

who also managed a, now defunct, daytime school New Light. After he left, teacher Cho Cho Mar became the new headmaster of the night school, while the daytime school was handed over to his nephew. The majority of the students are Muslim, while others are Hindu, Christian and Buddhist. All are of Myanmar/Burmese nationality but come from a mix of ethnic backgrounds. While growing numbers of children also attend the local Thai Islamic day school, many still attend the night school to learn Burmese and retain their Burmese culture.

The original donor supported Islam Bang Roong, along with another night school, Bangladesh, which no longer exists today. When the number of students rose to 20, Naw Paw Ray advised the school administration to hire a second teacher, and soon, student numbers rose to 40. After the original donor stopped funding, Islam Bang Roong went two years without a donor and ran on emergency funds handed out by BMWEC until a new donor came along. However, this donor lasted only till 2017; thus today, the school has once again been without a stable donation for four years.



for the teachers to stay in, for example. This support didn't last, and since then, funds have been on and off.

To solve the funding problem, the school began collecting fees from the parents which resulted in a steady drop in students and teachers through the 2010's. During its lowest point, around 2014-2015, Paw Ray even said that they could close the school if necessary, but the school team refused to do so and instead organized a lottery event to cover expenses. Because of these financial difficulties, emergency funds from BMWEC resumed for several years, and KMCC covered the land rental fees. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has deprived the school of these funds; so the struggle continues. On top of the problems created by COVID-19, the owner of the land refused to renew the land rental contract after 10 years, so the school leaders have been looking for a new location for their school for the end of March 2021. With no strong donor currently, moving and rebuilding the school once they are actually able to rent new land will be very challenging. In spite all of this, Future Garden is still thriving with six teachers and 91 students of kindergarten to 7th grade, which is really remarkable!

Future Garden is another learning centre that has been growing and surviving on fluctuating donations from foreign donors along with community support. Originally self-funded and with only three teachers and 75 students from kindergarten to 2nd grade, the school has experienced several changes in donors and has had to rely at times on emergency funding of 100,000 kyats (approx. just over 1500 baht) from BMWEC. From 2009 to 2011, the school was at its strongest, with 285 students and more than 10 teachers at peak due to strong foreign funding along with a generous donor who provided cash for renting land for school buildings. This allowed school leaders to build new teaching facilities and a dorm





Muditar (meaning “rejoicing at someone's success or prosperity”) was established near a factory and has existed for seven years. It was formed by U Zaw Htun who began gathering children around the complex where he lived in order to teach them. Once a local wealthy man found out about this project, he provided the land and built a school so the children could get a proper place to learn. The school was established and slowly grew with small funds and support from various groups and the parents.

U Zaw Htun passed away and was succeeded by another headmaster who also resigned due to health issues. So the remaining six teachers struggled to keep the school afloat. A disagreement between the school committee, made up of locals and some parents, and the local donor resulted in a further loss of funding, and the committee was left to manage the school on their own. At its inception, Muditar had classes from kindergarten to 8th grade with more than 170 students at its height, but today it offers only kindergarten to 6th grade to about 80 students. The school also built a new school building last year with the communal support, but due to difficulties the new building is still without a roof.



Champion Learning Centre opened in 2009 as a night school and transitioned into a day school in May 2012. Nowadays, it is a middle school with 128 students and 9 teachers providing education for students from kindergarten to 7th grade. Throughout the 11 years of the school's existence, it has undergone a series of changes in funding with no real stable donor for a long time. The school has also received emergency funds from the BMWEC at times. Finally, last year Champion's situation began to look up when it found a promising donor, but this donor too stopped funding before the end of this school year due to several difficulties, and the school's struggles resumed. Now it has to collect monthly fees from the students in order to carry on. Despite these challenges, Champion's faculty has been stable, and happily, the previous donor has recently provided some aid to the school, and it seems like it could resume its support next school year.



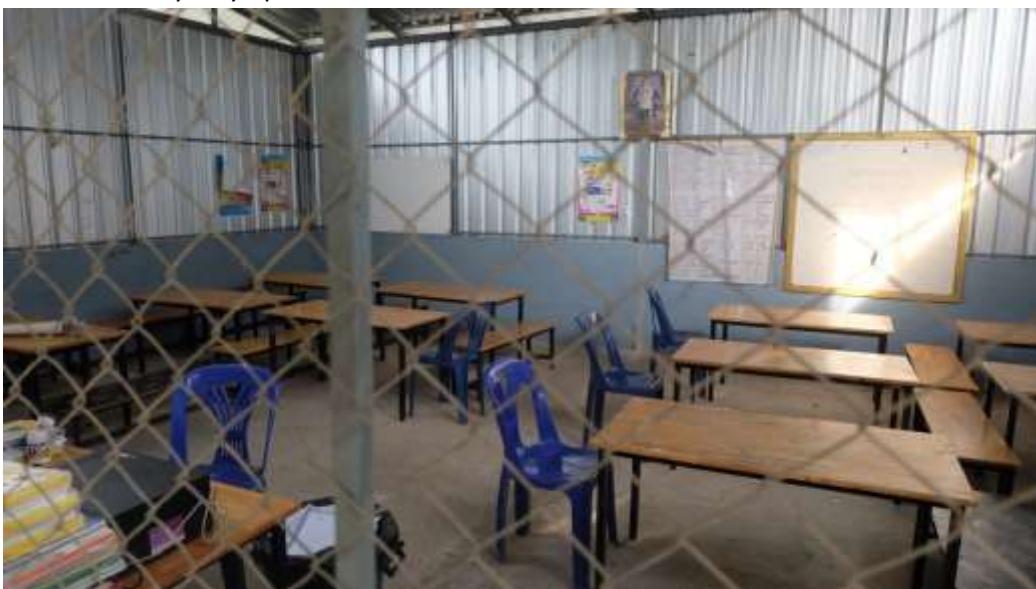


Sunset Learning Centre is a night school like Islam Bang Roong. It was established in December 2009 and taught general subjects such as Myanmar language, English, Mathematics, etc. until 2013 when it switched to the official Myanmar curriculum. It has been working diligently to further integrate and implement the Myanmar curriculum in the school so the students can take official state exams. Noteworthy is that many of their current teachers also teach at Champion in the daytime. Like Champion, it has also had fluctuating donors especially during this 2020-2021 academic year.

year when the COVID-19 pandemic is raging on. However, the school is still carrying on and has received support from the BMWEC and other education organizations during this period. In addition, because of the pandemic, Sunset is providing education through home-based learning as are many other schools. The school currently has 129 students and eight teachers.



In conclusion, after months of mandatory closing down of the schools across Thailand due to the COVID pandemic, many Thai schools in Thailand are slowly reopening due to the lack of new cases of the virus in the country a few months ago. Migrant Learning Centres are also working towards reopening. The schools described above have already taken adequate measures to do so. For example, they are establishing Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) and committees and have made new rules for social distancing and sanitation. However, currently, they are still waiting for approval as they continue with home-based learning activities despite many difficulties. While even before the pandemic, these aforementioned schools were struggling when it came to finding donors, now, with COVID-19 raging across the world, times are harder than ever for the teachers – who continue trying to keep their schools afloat even without funding or salaries. Their commitment is remarkable and encouraging, but spirit can only go so far. Without solid donors and material support, these schools will inevitably have to close, depriving the children of a means for getting education in migrant areas. That will be a sad day. We, as part of the migrant education community, are working persistently to make sure they stay open so that “the flowers will continue to bloom.”



Migrant Education in times of global pandemic



August was a busy month for the BMWEC and the schools it oversees. The BMWEC, local education councils, health institutes and other collaborating education organizations had a meeting in order to form a committee to assess the migrant schools for reopening. The schools are being assessed in accordance with 44 criteria established by the Thai authorities. After the meeting and creation of the committee, the BMWEC sent notices to the schools about these criteria, and school representatives participated in a workshop to learn the screening process approved and certified by the local authorities.

Every student who wants to attend when migrant learning centres reopen had to have their temperatures monitored for 14 days. The data was then sent to the local authorities. Afterwards the Burmese teachers, Burmese migrant workers, and the local residents were tested by the health institute randomly to get cleared.

This process of preparation for 64 schools lasted through September. Due to circumstances, not all schools could be equipped and readied equally; factors like location, budget, student and staff ratio matter a lot. Local education authorities wanted the committee to check the schools that are 80 to 100% ready, for fitness before giving a green light for the opening of these schools. So the committee has sent representatives to visit the 33 schools which are within that 80 and 100 % range. If all goes well, the hope is that these schools will be allowed reopen in October.

However, the current explosion of COVID-19 cases in Burma has made it difficult to get final approval at this time.

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During its investigations, the committee noticed that many schools had already taken social-distancing measures inside their school environment, such as appropriately marking places on the ground to make sure people stay apart. Hand gel sanitizers and faucets for washing hands as well as spare masks were also present in most of the schools. However, supplies of hand gel sanitizers and soap were scarce. Also, when creating marks to indicate social distancing spacing, there was some miscommunication regarding the directions provided by the marks. For example, some people thought that the marks indicated places to sit. Finally, lack of space (cramped classrooms) when implementing social-distancing protocols and deficiency in ventilation in migrant schools were highlighted as problems.

Some schools will also face problems related to transporting students as most schools can only afford having one vehicle for student transportation. The school driver either has to cram all the children on the bus to make one trip which means violating the social distancing protocols, or he must make several trips which is costly. What we have heard from migrant teachers is that they are eager to get their schools reopened because of the difficulties they have faced with current home-based learning activities. With home-based learning they have only for 45 minutes a day, two days a week to teach tasks that would take three hours at least at school. In addition, since home-based learning began in July during the rainy season, teachers faced difficulties teaching at their students' homes, most of which are the cheap shoddy houses with leaky roofs or damp surroundings that are rented to the migrant workers – clearly not ideal for teaching with books and papers. Finally, home-based teaching, done in rotation at different students' houses, received complaints from some parents due to either privacy or space concerns. Some parents also took their children out when they went to work. Others considered such learning an ineffective and inefficient waste of time and decided to withdraw their children from school for this school year altogether.



The majority of the schools reviewed by the committee agreed to follow its advice regarding preparation for reopening; however, some could not, due to lack of resources. In a meeting held on October 1st, the committee members shared their observations with school leaders and decided what to do next. At this time, the local authorities and health institutes deemed the schools are not ready to be open yet due to the aforementioned difficulties and the rise of COVID-19 cases in Burma at the moment. It remains to be seen what will happen next.



A workshop for teachers of 7th grade on the new curriculum



Since 2015, there have been ongoing attempts to revise the education curriculum in Myanmar, so that it will be more modern and versatile. The process is slow, but progress is being made. New curricula for 4th and 7th grades are now available, and teachers have been preparing to teach these new and improved courses in spite of the hurdles caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that have made opening schools unfeasible at this moment. Recently, the promised 4th and 7th grade textbooks arrived in Mae Sot from Myanmar; thus a workshop to acquaint the teachers with the new

curriculum has gone ahead. Originally, the workshop was to be given by education officials from Myanmar, but due to the pandemic, education organizations in Mae Sot had to improvise and to provide the teachers with the training.



A four day workshop for the grade 7th teachers was arranged to take place between 29th September and 2nd October. Staff from various education organizations went to the Teacher Preparation Centre (TPC) complex on 28th September, a day before the workshop, to prepare for it. They also arranged for accommodation for teachers who came from far away and needed a place to spend the night during the workshop period. Transportation for the teachers had to be scheduled and proved to be somewhat of a challenge as the driver was not familiar with the travel routes.

The workshop ran from 9 am to 4 pm each day, and afterwards the teachers were ferried back to their residence or the place where they are staying. Physical exercise activities were provided after lunch in order to reenergize the teachers and make the atmosphere lively again after a morning of continuous teaching. After the workshop was completed on 2nd October, a farewell speech was given by the representatives of each education organization that made this workshop possible, and certificates were given to the teachers. It was a nice experience for the interning staff like myself, who volunteered in shifts on both the first and final day of the workshop and documented the opening and closing of the workshop on video camera. I hope I can also take part in a coming workshop for the 4th grade teachers on new curriculum too.



BMWEC Intern
Nyanthar Myint

