

Education in the hills

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“Children arrive at Ban Mae Surin Noi School in the early morning”.

Ban Mae Surin Noi, Thailand, August 2008 – As the heavy morning mist begins to lift from the emerald green hills, small groups of children can be seen descending the steep and muddy footpaths that lead to this tiny hamlet in the rugged highlands of Thailand’s Mae Hong Son province.

Most of the children come from the small wood-and-bamboo homes that dot the hillsides, but some have walked for kilometres, waking up well before dawn to start their journey. Their destination on this rain-swept morning is a simple but solid three-room structure with rough plank floors, partial bamboo walls and a tin roof.

Despite its humble appearance, the building is all important to the children because it offers them something they had no access to before – a formal primary education. The 20 children who attend school here are ethnic Karens, and for many of them the education they are receiving here may be the only opportunity they will ever have to learn in a structured school environment.

The Baan Mae Surin Noi School is one of 17 schools in this northwestern province of Thailand that are being operated by the Ministry of Education (MOE) under a UNICEF-supported project providing hill tribe children in poor and remote rural areas of Mae Hong Son with a primary level education.

The hill tribe school project began in 2005 after a UNICEF-supported survey in Mae Hong Son’s Pang Mapa district found that more than a thousand children of school age were not attending primary school. The initial survey findings led to later surveys in Mae Hong Son’s Muang, Pai and Khunyuam districts, which also showed large numbers of hill tribe children not in school.



“Kindergarten children at Ban Mae Surin Noi School play and exercise during their class. The school has about 20 children who are ethnic Karens”.

“We walked house to house, mountain to mountain, and knocked on every door to see if the children were in school or not,” said Suraphan Suebfak, Assistant Director of the Mae Hong Son Education Service Area Office (ESAO) 1, recalling the first survey. “We had no idea before the survey that so many children were not enrolled in school.”

The survey found that parents were keeping their children home because existing schools were too far away, making it extremely difficult for the children to walk to and from them every day. At the same time, the remoteness of the hill tribe communities and the inadequate road infrastructure made it difficult for the government to build proper education facilities in these communities.

Suraphan said that the Mae Hong Son ESAO decided then that “if the children can’t come to the schools we have, we will bring schools to them instead. We decided then that at these schools we would have only teachers, students and the materials to teach and learn with. Everything else, such as administration and management, we would take care of at the ESAO office in Mae Hong Son town.”

This year, there are 472 primary students in the 17 schools, and they are being taught by 41 teachers. Seventeen of the teachers are from ethnic hill tribes and speak both Thai and ethnic languages.

Pornchai Udompanich, Acting Director of Mae Hong Son Education School Area 1, said the hill tribe schools differ from other schools in Thailand in a number of ways. Due to limited space and teachers, children from different grades sometimes learn together in class.

The students also do not wear uniforms, but rather their ethnic dress or other clothes. There are no janitors and no food service at the schools, and the students clean and cook for themselves. During the dry season, students at the 14 schools located near the Thai-Myanmar border have an additional important lesson to learn: how to take refuge in a bunker in case of military activity in the area.

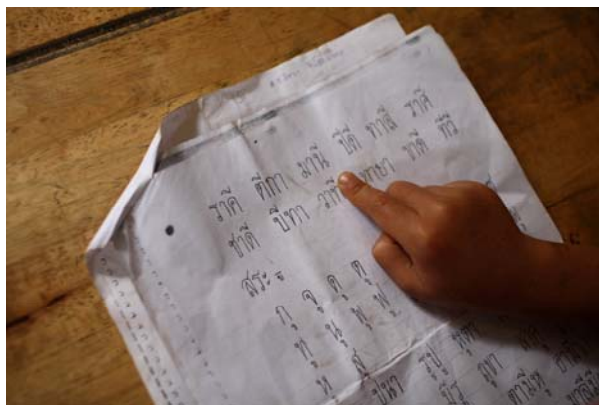


“A student wears her ethnic dress. At Baan Dong Mai Fai School, most of the students are ethnic Lahus”.

Rangsun Wiboonuppatum, Chief of the Education for UNICEF Thailand, noted that while the hill tribe schools’ educational facilities are not of the same standard as state schools, “the most important thing is to get children into school and to get them learning.”

The main education goals for the hill tribe schools are to ensure that all the students are able to read and write Thai and do basic math. The students are also taught to use natural resources wisely in order to protect their environment, and to preserve their ethnic traditions and culture.

Some of the learning materials at the schools are translated into ethnic languages, including Karen, Lahu and Lisu, and are used to help promote the children’s progress in learning Thai. For other subjects, they use the same curriculum as other state schools.



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“It is crucial for hill tribe children to get a primary education and to learn Thai and basic math,” Rangsun said. “Without these basic skills, it is very difficult for them to communicate with other people in Thailand and to earn a living when they grow up. Some of the children are now able to help their parents communicate with doctors or nurses when they go to hospitals.”

Nattawadee Patamayapa, an ethnic Karen and a teacher at the Ban Mae Surin Noi School, said the best thing about teaching in a small school “is that we can pay more attention to the needs of each student. We are very close with the students and we know every child’s family. And all the children are very happy to come to school.”

That the children enjoy school and value the education they are receiving is obvious. On a stormy morning, when even four-wheel-drive vehicles are barely able to make it up the mud-slick road that leads to Baan Mae Surin Noi, all of the students show up for school and only one is late.

After washing off their muddy boots, hands and feet at the pump next to the school, the students form orderly, straight lines for assembly and sing the school song loudly and proudly. Then, in the two small classrooms, one with tables and chairs for the older children and the other with mats for the younger ones to sit on, they enthusiastically begin their lessons.

Using flash cards, Nattawadee drills the older students on Thai nouns. Although some students struggle to remember the Thai word for bowl, when the flash card for smile comes up, all hands are raised.

All of the schools receive strong community support, and all of them were built with mainly local materials by the students' parents and other community members.

"They never miss an opportunity to help us," Nattawadee said. "People from the whole village come to help, even those who are not the parents or relatives of our students."

Nattawadee and teachers from other schools said parents are becoming more interested in their children's education and only keep them home when they are too sick to attend.

At Baan Pang Kham Noi School in Pang Mapa district, children from various ethnic groups, including Shan, Pao and Lahu, learn together due to the limited number of classrooms and teachers. Although the school still lacks many learning materials, especially for science, learning levels are improving. For the first time this year, the school is sending a student to the province-wide mathematics competition in Mae Hong Son town.



"At Baan Pang Kham Noi School, children from various ethnic groups, including Shan, Pao and Lahu, and from different grades learn together due to the limited number of classrooms and teachers".

Three years ago, before Baan Pang Kham Noi School was established, children in the village studied at the non-formal education centre located in the village. But their studies were inconsistent since their teacher also had to give lessons at other non-formal education centres in the area.

“I’m glad that we now have our own school now,” said Boonsong, 12, a Grade 6 student. “Now we get to come to school every day. In the past whenever the teacher wasn’t here, we usually just played all day or helped our parents in the fields.”

Boonsong said he plans to continue his studies to university level, and that he wants to become a teacher who will help a new generation of children in his village with their studies.

Currently, about 30 per cent of the children who graduate from the hill tribe schools go on to secondary school. Most of those who do not continue their educations end up working in order to help their families.

UNICEF’s Rangsun believes that number of ethnic children who enter secondary school will increase as parents become more aware of the importance of education, and that education officials are committed to ensuring improved access for hill tribe children into secondary school.

Sombat Boonlasrisab, a farmer whose son is studying at Baan Pang Kham Noi School, is one parent who is already convinced about the value of education.

“I myself do not know how to write,” he said. “A school like this is what I always wanted to have in our village. Our children will now have the opportunity for a better future.”

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