



Burmese Migrant Workers' Education Committee

Po.Box 140, Mae Sot, Tak 63110, Thailand. Ph: + 66 89 268 7708. Email: bmwecmaesot@yahoo.com

February, 2013

Migalaba!

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Teacher Seminar

With funding from DCA, BMWEC held the fourth Teachers' Seminar for those who work in migrant education in Mae Sot and surrounds on Friday and Saturday, February 22-23. Just over three hundred teachers from BMWEC and other education providers, as well as others involved with the administration and management of education participated in the seminar.



Gathering a migrant voice.

The theme for this year's conference was *Education: Creating the Future in Changing Times*. Not only is the political situation in Myanmar undergoing dramatic changes, but the wider changes across Asia (including the development of ASEAN) have important implications for migrant education. The seminar aimed to provide a forum in which migrant voices could be heard, and teachers were given the opportunity to listen to presentations and discuss their views on the priorities for policy makers in Thailand, Myanmar and on the border at the present time.



A group discussing the implications of ASEAN for education on the border and in Burma

The seminar also provided an opportunity to recognize those teachers whose commitment and long years of service to migrant education have had an impact on thousands of lives. This was both touching and inspiring. Our teachers are seldom given formal recognition for their hard work and dedication – and the both young people and older teachers who participated in the presentations were visibly moved



Paying respect to our senior teachers

Overall, the presentations stimulated lively discussion, and participants tackled both complex and contentious issues with insight and good humour. Despite ongoing difficulties with funding, and the consequent uncertainty and low salaries that face many learning centres, teachers' commitment to education and the children that they teach remains high. This was a feature of the seminar that was commented on by the 'foreigners' who attended the seminar. As one of them commented in the closing ceremony: "I wish that the donors could have been here. If they could see your (teachers') talent, commitment and professionalism – they would be feeling pretty good right now about how their money was being spent".



Our talented debaters are congratulated by EC member, Thaszin.

The seminar also provided the opportunity for teachers to demonstrate their talents in impromptu speeches (about some very challenging topics) and debate, as well as song and dance. We were also entertained by some very witty and cutting social

comment presented through skits and drama.

BMWEC staff ran the seminar smoothly and efficiently and Hsa Thoo Lei catered brilliantly.

Our very special thanks go to DCA for supporting this worthwhile event for BMWEC and the wider education community.



Teachers on stage!

Gaining formal recognition for migrant education - Update

We work hard to ensure that our students have options open to them when they leave our learning centres: either back in Burma /Myanmar; here in Thailand; or - if they have the opportunity - in a third country. Clearly, this means that we have a responsibility to ensure that our children receive a quality education that covers a curriculum that provides the learning that they need to continue their education in a different context, whether it be at another school or at tertiary level. We are also working to achieve formal recognition for migrant education so that their achievements within learning centres will give them an educational 'passport' to other institutions.

We continue to make progress in our negotiations with the Burma/Myanmar Government. We have been asked to provide details of students who might be returning to Burma/Myanmar: where they will go, what grade they should be placed in and so on. At this stage we do not know how many children will be returning to Myanmar and enrolling in government schools.

We have also been approached by the Rajabhat Universities System, which runs forty universities in regional provinces in Thailand, including Kamphaeng Phet Rajabhat University, which is located just

outside Mae Sot. They advised us that they would be keen for successful matriculation students to consider continuing their education with them if they wished to stay in Thailand.

Finally, we continue to support those students who are applying to study abroad. Currently, we have a number of students applying for university scholarships in Bangladesh, India, Chiang Mai and Bangkok.

The following link is to one of our former students who is currently studying at university in Chiang Mai. She is one of our “success stories” and a role model for current students. [*University student, Aye Phoo explains why migrant education has been important for her.* Youtube link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7aYY9PA164>]

Matriculation update

Our matriculation students continue to work hard. 50% passed the second formal test in December leading up to the final exam in February. To put this pass rate in perspective, the current overall pass rate in Burma/Myanmar is around 30%, including those who are taking the exam for the second or subsequent time. On the basis of the test, ALL students were awarded the High School Graduation certificate which provides the qualification necessary to enter a vocational school in Burma, as well as providing the basic qualification required by many employers.

The Myanmar government has also offered to donate funds for our students to sit the final examination in Myawaddy in February. In a ceremony to be held on March 1st they will present BMWEC with an amount to cover transport and living costs as well as examination entry fees.

Again we welcome this official recognition of, and support for, our migrant students and the work that we are currently doing.

Former Thai Prime Minister visits Hsa Thoo Lei

In December, former Thai Prime Minister and current Opposition Leader, Abhisit Vejjajiva visited Hsa Thoo Lei School to talk with staff of the school and BMWEC about the issues and challenges facing migrant education.



Hsa Thoo Lei Students present Mr Abhisit with roses as he is shown around the school

BMWEC talked to him about the need for recognition from both the Thai and Myanmar governments in order to facilitate student opportunities to continue their education at tertiary level. While acknowledging that reform in Burma has begun, BMWEC stressed the on-going need for funding for education on the border. Abhisit promised to support our cause when he visited the UK and met with various funding bodies.



For BMWEC it was exciting to have a politician at this level acknowledge migrant education and acknowledge the work that we do. He was particularly supportive of our dreams of achieving more opportunities in further education for migrant students, and we are hopeful that this is evidence of a changing climate in attitudes towards migrant participation in education at this level.

Naw Paw Ray speaks at conference in Hong Kong

In January, Paw Ray was an invited speaker at the 'Make a Difference' forum in Hong Kong (<http://www.mad.asia/>).

MaD's long-term goal is to build "a creative civil society" by inspiring and empowering young people throughout Asia to "create positive personal, economic, social and environmental change". The forum brought together 1,200 young people and "international change makers" to share inspiring stories, discuss challenges and plan "to make a difference".

Paw Ray's topic was *Fighting Oppression with Knowledge* and the key theme of her presentation was that it is through education that people can fight oppression and find a way forwards to a better future. She pointed out that denying people access to education is in fact a tool of oppression, and that migrant education represents the community's efforts to 'take back' their right to education.

The speech will be uploaded to the MaD website in the near future, so we will include the link in the next BMWEC newsletter for those who are interested.

Christmas and New Year Celebrations

Although Christmas Day is not a public holiday in Thailand, many of our schools celebrated Christmas with concerts for parents and the community.

At Hsa Thoo Lei, Christmas day was celebrated on December 29th with a church service and baptism, followed by a long, hot, hectic afternoon of crazy races, tug-of-war and lots of laughter. Children and adults lined up for prizes (soap, plates, mugs); everyone shouted encouragement (for everyone); spectators followed the rare spots of shade as the sun moved across the sky; and, it was a generally lots of fun!



Fashionistas Karen style

The highlight of the evening entertainment was a fashion design competition where Karen students from different post-10 programmes (who had been staying at Has Thoo Lei for the Karen Youth Organisation's annual meeting) modeled clothes that they had designed. They combined the flavours of traditional and modern Karen styles, to create outfits for men and women that were would have looked right at home on any fashion runway.



This was seriously a lot harder than it looks

New Year – both January 1st and Karen New Year on January 13th. was also celebrated in many of our learning centres. Islam Bum Roong held a part for children and community on Sunday, December 30th. The head teacher bought a present for each child (which was the cause of HUGE excitement); family members prepared food; the children – girls especially – wore their very best clothes; and everybody had a great time. The pictures below capture a little of the spirit of the occasion.



Wedding congratulations

Two of BMWECs staff at Good Morning School tied the knot in a ceremony at Flower Garden School on November 18th following a Buddhist service the day before. Wut Yi Htoo looked absolutely stunning - and Than Htun looked absolutely ecstatic!



Mother of the bride



(We are also delighted to hear that they will be joined by a small addition to their family later this year. So they deserve double congratulations and best wishes.)

In Memoriam

We end this newsletter with the sad news that one of our head teachers died last week.

San Tun Aung was known for his love for his school and community (and the long and impassioned speeches that he made in support of his learning centre at our head teacher meetings!)

San Tun Aung started 48K Learning Centre in 1998 and has been head teacher since then. He was a founding member of BMWEC and the first secretary to the Executive Committee. Prior to that he had been a politician with the Arakan Liberation Party, and had spent many years in prison for his bravery in supporting his people.

As head teacher, San Tun Aung gave tirelessly of his energy, time and resources. He not only gave from his own pocket, but also called on family and friends to help support the school. His generosity, passion and commitment will be missed. We were lucky to have had him as part of BMWEC and fortunate to have known this inspiring man

