

Volunteering at Hsa Thoo Lei School

by Lena Weller, October 2006

First impressions

When I came to Mae Sot I had no idea how bad the conditions for Migrants and Refugees are in reality. After a month I've got an insight into the life of Refugees here. I was surprised when I first came to Hsa Thoo Lei School (HTL) how many students there are and how nice the school building and the dormitory is. Amazing how big the school had become in only seven years of operation. I think this fast growing of the school is also an indicator for how many children in Mae Sot can not attend school at all. Around Mae Sot there are many migrant schools and after I've been to some of them I realized what a huge difference there must have been at HTL before the new building was built. Especially in the rainy season it must have been all muddy at school. The school does now have a good learning environment and because it is almost fully equipped with teachers and materials the students can concentrate on their education. The school now is working towards being recognized by the Thai authorities which would give the children the opportunity to study at university later. If the school develops further it might become an opportunity for children from other migrant schools as well. They can continue school at HTL.

My work as English teacher is very difficult because I don't speak Karen or Burmese. I have to work with a lot of pictures and act like a clown to explain things to them. I have no curriculum so I make up my own. At the beginning this was a problem because I had to find out what they know and what they don't know. Another problem is that they also learn Karen, Burmese and Thai besides English. All four languages have a different writing and so it is harder for the young ones to concentrate on English. If they don't understand what you are saying you can always sing a song.....

After a month now I think it is going very good. My new task will be getting all students information's and do a book on them. This is more what I intended to do when I came here. Teaching is good, but I'm feeling better with my new task now.

School

The school has two Kindergarten groups (KGA, KGB), primary and high school. At the moment Grade 1 to 10 exists. Next school year they are planning to extend to Grade 11. I was teaching primary school Grade one to four. I had 33 students in the first Grade, 22 in second Grade, 44 in third Grade and 23 in fourth Grade. In every Grade you find a range of age Groups because arriving children have to take a test to decide what Grade they will attend. The curriculum for Primary School consists of English, Karen, Burmese, Thai and Math. They have five hours of school a day, from nine to three o'clock with a lunch break from

twelve to one o'clock. Every morning before school starts they sing the national Anthem of Thailand and listen to a speech of one of the teachers, encouraging them to be good students. Most of the teachers speak English, so it's easy to ask questions and talk to the other people at the school. Everybody, teachers as well as students, appreciate all volunteer work and they are always concerned about your wellbeing and care for you. The teachers' room used to be in the same room with the computer lab.

During my stay the teachers' room was transformed into a computer lab so that the computer students don't disturb the teachers when they have class. In the week from the 16th to the 20th of October there were examinations at the school. I prepared half of the questions for the primary English examinations

Situation

Hsa Thoo Lei School is a big migrant school in Mae Sot. I was teaching English for three months and really enjoyed it. There are children living in a dormitory next to the school. They are either orphans or sent by their parents from Burma to Thailand for getting education. Other children at HTL are coming from Migrant Worker families in Mae Sot and get picked up by the school bus every morning. Migrant schools in Mae Sot are officially not recognized. I didn't expect the overall situation here to be as bad as it really is. On the other hand I didn't expect the school to be as modern as it is and the people to be so dedicated to help the children.

Information for other volunteers

The school has a small library with some teaching material. Anyway you should bring your own material. Most of the material in the school library is either in Burmese or in Karen so that you have to speak the language to understand it.

For teaching primary school it is useful to have pictures or songs. That will make lessons easier and will help the students to understand what you are talking about. You should remember that everything is very difficult to explain because they don't speak English and you don't have a translator in class with you. I think that workbooks are very useful where they can see pictures, write in and color the pages for fun. It suffices to bring one with you and copy it in a local copy shop.

You should think about the situation here while checking the workbook beforehand. I had some problems to explain to some teachers the meaning of basement because houses with basements do not exist here. There's no need to be too careful in choosing the right material. The children are watching a lot of TV and recent Hollywood movies. They have seen snow on television before. If the language barrier is too high you can always ask some of the teachers to translate for you.