

Report on my time at EMFS Nursery School

By Andrina Bernhard, January - April 2007

It has already been five weeks since I left the nursery school, but my mind easily wanders back to the children in Mae Hong Son. The habitual tremendous noise of thirty children's voices constitutes an even background out of which appear the memories of all the different children at the school: Some are bright and cheerful, some are silent and observing, some of the little ones are waddling after one of the teachers like ducklings after their mother. And some others, though just as little, are marching around full of self-confidence. In general, I got the impression that there are many aspects where these children are able to handle their lives more independently than their Swiss peers.

Before writing this report, I have read the one by Ursina Marti, who volunteered at EMFS Nursery School from December 2005 to February 2006. There it is mentioned that some children just do not know how to behave, that they bite, hit and do not observe the rules. I think that in this respect, there has been quite a bit of progress. Of course, there are still children who snatch things from others without asking and do not know how to share. However, I have not seen children biting each other and I have witnessed many situations where a child came to help another or tried to comfort it. Also, the children follow the daily routine amazingly well. After lunch, every one brushes their teeth and goes to the classroom to find their sleeping places for the afternoon nap. Certain exercises of discipline have been integrated in the daily routine, like standing in a row before lunchtime. It is important that the children get used to such elements as discipline and order play an essential role in the Thai school system in which they will have to find their place in the future. In my eyes, the EMFS Nursery School has found a good middle path between discipline and space for the children. I once visited a nursery school for Thai children and I must say that the students there seemed much more passive than their curious and imaginative peers at EMFS Nursery School. The lively imagination of these children has always impressed me. It was wonderful to watch them listening to Tutu (one of the teachers) telling them a story. Following Tutu's invitations, they all reached up and picked imaginary apples from imaginary trees and were even able to describe the fruit's taste with a unanimous "delicious!". With very few props, they could build up complete new worlds for themselves, an ability which is slowly disappearing in industrial countries where many children are brought up on computer games and an abundance of toys that leave no space for freedom in their use.

The head of EMFS, Maung Maung, sometimes urged us to teach more English and writing. Personally, I think that, considering their age, the children learn a lot. First of all, it should be

kept in mind that they are still busy with broadening their Thai vocabulary. Besides, several of them can already trace English and Thai letters. For teaching the English alphabet, I have drawn a picture for each letter which can be described in simple words. These pictures, games and songs help the children to learn their first English words. I once had a very proud child in my evening English class, as she had answered my question to my teenage students before they had been able to do so.

When talking about teaching, I also tried to point out to Maung Maung the importance of cognitive, sensuous, social and other abilities that should not be neglected. Some of the children are really careful at colouring in pictures and are very happy about the opportunities they are given in the creative part before lunch. Some learn to control the parts of their body by clapping their hands, stomping their feet, clicking their tongue or snapping their fingers while singing. During my three months, I tried to regularly show them new things that could fascinate them and make the day more varied. We experimented with play dough, balloons, animal masks, soap bubbles, face painting etc. These inputs were a good way to avoid impending dreary hours. In the afternoons, boredom could come up more easily, firstly due to the enormous heat, which affected the teachers more badly than the children, and secondly due to the different picking up times which made it difficult to do activities as a whole group. Some parents came soon after the children got up, while others did not appear until late in the afternoon, when almost every one had already left more than an hour ago. In time, however, I learned to adapt to these circumstances.

All in all, my impression of the atmosphere prevailing in the nursery school and the ideas and the approaches that can be found there is very positive. One of the teachers in particular understands it very well to motivate the children and handle them in a loving, supporting way. Without ever raising her voice or making threatening gestures, she has established the authority needed to lead this large group. As a volunteer, I never came up to her level in this respect, but I could bring in some new ideas and help to keep up the daily routine as well as to introduce new elements into it. In return, I made invaluable experiences and learned a lot about the situation in Burma and the migrants in Thailand. The various talks with people Maung Maung introduced me to gave me an insight that is of great importance for me. Sometimes, the topic of charity organisations came up. From what I experienced and heard about development aid and charity organisations during my stay in Mae Hong Son, I can say that the way of supporting projects that Child's Dream has chosen seems really sensible to me. I hope that you will be able to go on with backing people in the border areas for a long time!