



Final Report for Baan Khun Mae Yod School

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The school had 124 students from kindergarten to grade 9. There was only one class per grade. All students were of Karen ethnic from five different villages; Baan Khun Mae Yod, Baan Nam-Tok, Baan Yod-Pai, Baan Pa-Kuay, and Baan Mae Ra-Gee. Those villages were located 5 to 13 kilometers away from the school so most students stayed in school's dormitories (one of which was built by Child's Dream Foundation) during school's days and went home on Friday afternoon. Students were very shy but very polite and friendly.

The reasons I applied to be a volunteer teacher were to gain more experience in reflective teaching with minority students and also to observe tribal's vernacular architecture and their cultural landscape. I was looking for a school located in a natural setting which has minimum influence from cities. I felt that Baan Khun Mae Yod school was a place to apply. It was 8 hours away from Chiang Mai downtown (by driving) and two hours away from Kun-Yuam district in Mae Hong Son province. Although Baan Khun Mae Yod school was in a very remote area, it has enough facilities to accommodate my stay; electricity, portable water, telephone line, internet access, and proper toilet.

I hope this report provides necessary information for prospect volunteers to make a decision to come and to prepare their trips.

Volunteer Period : Nov 7th 2013 – Mar 21st 2014

It was winter when I was there. The average temperature during the daytime was 10 degree Celsius (with sun shine most of the time) while nighttime would go down to 5. As there was no heater or hot water line at the school, sleeping in a tent while hugging a hot water bottle (+sleeping bag and heavy blankets) was not a bad idea. Another way to get over the cold was to eat spicy food. Karen tribe is famous for their chili!! Moreover, this period was also a dry season, so there were some dusty wind especially in the afternoon.

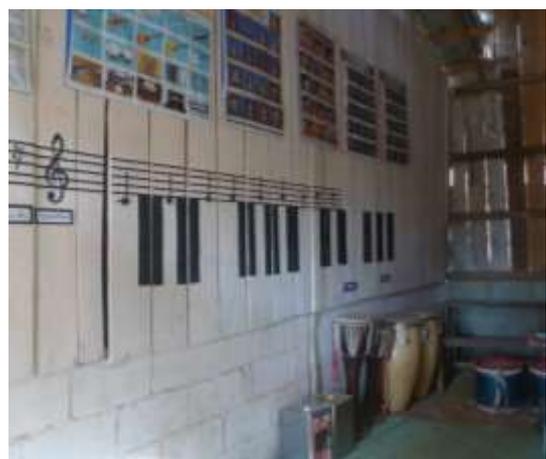


Assigned Work (19 hours / week) : English Class (grade 4, 5, 7)

Arts Class (grade 7, 8, 9)

ASEAN Studies Class (Grade 4, 5, 6)

I have a landscape architecture background so the school assigned me to teach English, Arts and ASEAN Studies. Also, as I am Thai, I have a privilege from the school to teach like a full-time teacher teaching 19 hours per week (which was a little bit overwhelming). Although, I had some teaching experience in after school arts programs, youth art camps in Thailand and United States, this was my first time as a full-time teacher in a public school. It was quite different in terms of fixed curriculum and government's expectation. However, I found it challenging and using it as an opportunity to strengthen my teaching ability.



Extra-Curricular : sports day, New Year's party and gifts exchange, singing competition, boy-girl scout camping, school's excursion, graduation ceremony, students' house visit



Boy-girl scout camping day



School's house warming day



Students' house visit at Baan Nam-Tok



Baan Nam-Tok Tour

Apart from classroom activities, Baan Khun Mae Yod has a lot of extracurricular for students to enjoy. Students here love to play sports such as volleyball, soccer, kick volleyball, and petanque.



Sports Day

Students also love to sing and dance both pop songs and Karen songs. However, they did not know how to play any musical instruments. Almost every musical instruments at the school were broken (except one bell lyre). With some help from donors and the school, all the broken instruments were fixed and we also got additional ones. Now the school has melodeons, snare drums, bell lyre, tambourines, flutes, guitars, Ukuleles, Thai guitars (Sung), Thai Violins (Sor), and Thai flutes. I helped the school put everything together in a music room. One challenging thing after this was how to maintain the instruments in good conditions. I made some borrowing rules and taught students how to take care of the instruments. Personally, I do not like rules and regulations myself; however, students here always get things easily from donors so sometimes they did not handle things with care. Hopefully, they take good care of the instruments this time. Fingers crossed ☺



Challenges

One of the challenges here was students' knowledge in English. As all students spoke their dialect at home, it was hard for the students to translate English into Thai and then into Karen language. It took me a while to realized that students did not understand anything I wrote on the board. After that I tried to learn how to speak Karen language hoping it would be easier for the students. However, I found out that it was more difficult for both of us as Karen language has limited numbers of vocabulary (this reflects from their simple life). An example for this was that they used the same word for BLUE and GREEN, also had no word to describe BROWN.

Students have learned how to read and write (copying what teacher wrote on the board) rather than listen and speak. Also, 7th grade students needed a karaoke text in Thai for every word written on the whiteboard as that was how they learned in the past. They recognized the Thai karaoke words instead of English words. 4th and 5th graders could recognize only some English alphabets. In my opinion, it will be very challenging for foreign volunteers who cannot speak either Thai or Karen language. Regardless, the students would still be more than happy to talk to you in English after they got to know you and overcame their shyness.

Another challenge at Baan Khun Mae Yod School was time management; both working time and personal time. As students stayed in dormitories during the weekdays, teachers' responsibilities would not finish at the end of the day like other schools. Being away from home, young children usually worried about their pain more than it actually was. Moreover, kindergarten students often got homesick during the weekdays. Some after school activities could be a lot of help for the students. Actually, I did not mind being a teacher for 24 hours; however, I found it a little difficult for me to prepare a lesson for the next day. On the other hand, lessons outside classrooms were more appealing than ones in the class. Therefore, I enjoyed playing with students after school very much (and we all learned a lot from each other at the same time).



Making an "X-ray machine" for Children's Day Play



Making SMORES

Apart from all the challenges I mentioned, there were many great things about being there. Everyone at the school was very nice and supportive. All teachers have been very helpful and caring especially Kru Supachai, the school's only English teacher and Kru Aoy who took care of me. Kru Aoy was not only supported me on my teaching job but also helped me to be closed with students quickly. She gave advices on cultural adjustment with Karen students, brought me to villages, and included me into all extra-curricular activities she was doing. The director in charge was very understanding and encouraging. He listened to my proposals and tried his best to accommodate my request.

The best thing was that there are so many things that could be improved at Baan Khun Mae Yod school. It was a great place for proactive volunteers who would like to explore new things and who had projects in mind. The school could find a financial support for your project.



Kru Aoy in the kitchen



Camping Day

Villagers were very nice too. Some weeks that I ran out of fresh food, I would go to Baan Mae Yod to have dinner or get some pumpkins and melons. Students' house visit was another fun thing here. I had a chance to visit all villages during my stay to explore how Karen people live. Every houses loved to have guests and they would provide a big meal for guests to eat. Karen people grew their own food. Therefore, the meal was made from an organic hand-picked food. The only problem was that my stomach could sustain only until the fifth house...



Social space on the street at Baan Khun Mae Yod



Girly gang from Baan Nam-Tok



Climbing a tamarind tree with monkeys at Pa-Kuay



How students in Mae Ra-Gee knows their weights

I had been falling in love with the nature here. The school is located on top of the mountain surrounded by mountainous terrain. The view from a soccer field overlooking corn fields and stepping rice paddies below were very beautiful. Moreover, sun raised and sun set at Baan Khun Mae Yod were very pretty and reminded me very much of James Turrell's. In December and January, there would be some mist appeared on top of the mountain making an impressive panoramic view.

Lastly, almost needless to say, students at Baan Khun Mae Yod school were really nice. They were very encouraging and attentive. They loved everything that I did and paid good attention in classes. I am glad I decided to be a volunteer teacher at Baan Khun Mae Yod school. I wish I could stay longer and have fun with the students.

Cultural adjustment

Casualty - Unlike western culture that taking written words as an agreement, Karen people took speaking words seriously. Therefore, be careful of making any plan that could sound like an appointment.

Improvising – Plans could be changed any minutes according to teachers' schedule conflict or when there were not enough teachers at the school. Therefore, teachers should be ready for anything at all time. You could be asked to entertain 30 children for a whole day or to teach 124 students moral ethics for two hours.

Personal Space – As students were all relatives, they were used to go into each other houses and use other people belongings freely. Sometimes students would use unattained things people put around without bad intentions. Moreover, they loved to be part of things teachers were doing including reading emails, checking Facebook, or using your laptop. Rather than getting mad, give them some good advices 😊