

Headlines: Into the outskirts		
Media: Bangkok Post Newspaper		
Country: Thailand		
Date: 25 November 2008	Section: Learning Post	Page: 1
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Bangkok Post

www.bangkokpost.com

Into the outskirts

Seameo's community involvement project increases the effectiveness of teachers and students in a remote school in Saraburi



Students raise their hands in hopes of receiving an opportunity to be the first to give the correct answer.

Located on the edge of the Isan plateau and approximately 150km northeast of Bangkok, Muak Lek district has some very good schools and is a wonderful place for tourists, but further away from the town centre there are schools that still lack proper equipment and well-trained teachers.

"Many of our students here are troubled. Some are extremely poor. Some have parents who are divorced," says Ms Bussaba Chochoychoo, a Songkhla-born teacher who has been teaching at the school for 10 years.

Ms Bussaba says there is a high turnover among students because many families from other regions come here to settle down, while some parents, after their divorce,

move out and take their children with them, effectively splitting up the family. All of these factors contribute to the social problems of some students.

The school hosts 581 students from kindergarten to Mathayom 3 (Grade 9) levels and 24 teachers, which represents a teacher shortage. Some teachers may not be fully skilled and some are teaching academic subjects which they did not major in, says Ms Bussaba.

"Generally, students' scholastic performance is average, with some performing poorly," explains Ms Bussaba, but the situation is improving since Seameo (the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation, a secretariat of the United Nations) entered the picture.

Seameo to the rescue

Seameo has adopted Ban Subsanoon School, along with two others: Ban Pruewai School in Chachoengsao province and Chonkanyanukoon Saensuk School in Chon Buri province.



Students enjoy a "What's the Answer?" game. The team that hits the biscuit container first is entitled to answer first.

The adoption scheme is part of Seameo's community involvement project that is recommended by the Seameo Council for the Seameo centre in each Southeast Asian country that is a member of Seameo.

The project encourages the setting up of school adoption programmes with the objective of generating sustainable improvement in school systems, learning facilities, teacher qualifications, school management and parental involvement.

Seameo first worked with Ban Subsanoon School from 2001 to 2004. The adoption scheme focused on teacher development and improving the learning facilities. Today, the thrust has widened and includes training sessions and workshops for teachers in the areas of maths, English and computer technology.

Some teachers have been sent to Seameo Recsam (Regional Centre for Education in Science and Mathematics) in Penang, Malaysia, for additional training. Ms Bussaba is one of six teachers sent to Recsam to be trained in the recommended methods for teaching maths and science.

She recalls that without Seameo's help, she would not have been able to benefit from such an opportunity.

After a four-year absence, Seameo returns to Ban Subsanoon School and notes that the school still lacks adequate facilities and teaching materials. Some teachers previously trained by Seameo have moved away and no longer teach in the school.

Seameo's focus on its return visit to the school is to provide information technologies to facilitate teaching and learning activities, according to Dr Tinsiri Siribodhi, Seameo's administration and communication deputy director and the current director of the Seameo community involvement project in Thailand.

However, she mentions that the highest priority is not the hardware, but training and development of the school's teachers.

The goal is to educate teachers on how to integrate information technologies - hardware: computers, overhead projectors, electronic whiteboards, etc.; and digital tools: educational software programs, the Internet, audio and visuals - into their teaching plans.

"The supply of hardware such as computers is the least important," says Dr Tinsiri, because "many organisations, when they want to help schools, usually provide computers first, but do not train teachers [how to use them effectively]."

"If we want to help schools, it is vital that we need to help develop teacher skills first. It is like instead of giving fish, it would be better if we give them fishing rods and teach them how to fish," she says.

She hopes that the teachers at Ban Subsanoon School will be able to use the knowledge, skills, materials, equipment and other benefits of the Seameo adoption programme to further develop themselves and the students on a self-sustaining basis.

In the future, Seameo expects to introduce a community project among member countries that involves the cross-border exchange of teachers, experts and students.

Knowledge with a smile

"I'm a part of your body. I am long. You use me when you stand or walk. What am I?," reads a paper shown to the students by a Seameo staff under the shade of a giant Albizia julibrissin (silk) tree.



A teacher and a Seameo staff member explain the Dewey Decimal Classification system, which is used to organise library books.

"Legs!," shouted a student from the back.

This is just one of many games and activities that Seameo introduced to Ban Subsanoon School. "We want all our staff to get a real experience of school and children, so that they'll have more commitment to what they are doing," says Dr Tinsiri.

Such activities are now part of their annual staff retreat. This is the first time that the organisation incorporated a social involvement project into the staff outing.

Interactive skits and schemes, properly focused, are used to develop students' life and social skills by emphasizing teamwork, cooperation, planning, communication and problem solving. These fun activities can also strengthen the relationships among the Seameo staff and the school's teachers and students.

Seameo staff prepared nine games for the students, who were divided into three groups: Prathom 1 to 3 (Grades 1 to 3), Prathom 4 to 6 (Grades 4 to 6) and Mathayom 1 to 3 (Grades 7 to 9).

The difficulties of each game vary according to age and grade level. For example, in the "What's the Answer?" game, the youngest students were asked to identify pictures using words in English.

In the "Amazing Library" game, the oldest students were asked to separate into two teams and then each team was given a research topic. They had to compete to find the book to be used for the research.

"Students often think they have to study using books only. The games teach them that they can really apply their life's (innate) knowledge," says Piyapong Pradubmook, a maths teacher who together with Seameo officers were in charge of a maths game called "How Much Do You Have?" for the middle-aged students.

In the maths game, each student was assigned a value, such as one, two or ten baht. Then, Mr Piyapong called out a number and students had to group together to match the stated monetary value.

The varied and entertaining activities throughout the day bring joy and happiness to the students and allows them to apply their skills and knowledge to learn new information.

Some students admit that before they participated in the "Amazing Library" game, for example, they didn't know that the Dewey Decimal Classification system is used to categorise books in a library.

Brighter future

Ms Bussaba hopes that in the future students within Subsanoon area and other nearby communities will not have to travel far to get a solid education.

"Some families here have sent their children to study in [private] schools in Wang Muang and Pak Chong districts. They believe that letting their children live and study in a larger city would be more beneficial than being educated upcountry," explains Ms Bussaba.

"With help from Seameo, they may see that the school is ready to adequately take care of their children," she adds.

When asked what she would like to see her students accomplish in the next five years, Ms Bussaba reflected: "I hope to see more students continue their education at university level and become aware of the importance of education. Currently, students have only a vague idea of what they are going to do after they finish Mathayom 3. "When the goal is unclear, students end up working in nearby factories. They should have well-defined goals."
