



## EDUCATION MAKES OUR VISION CLEARER

ALEISHA KEATING writes of the barriers to schooling and the value education gives in the lives of Myanmar migrants in Thailand.

**A** couple of boys are laughing in the back of the classroom, drumming away on an imaginary beatbox. A girl is quietly doodling pictures of Minions in her book. The usual bright spark up the front eagerly answers all my questions. And a boy has his head down on the desk, apparently sleeping. We are revising past tenses in English, which, for most teenagers in the class, is at least their third language. Weeks later they write letters telling me about themselves, their family, their dreams. The sleepy boy recounts how he and his brother work in a rubber plantation most nights after school, often not finishing until midnight. No wonder he often struggles to stay awake, I think. Despite this, he always has a smile plastered on his face and a sparkle revealing a yearning to learn and grow. This is but one of the many challenges that students at Marist Asia Foundation (MAF) in Ranong, Thailand, face in their pursuit of education.

### Need for Education

There are an estimated 4 million Myanmar migrants in Thailand, according to The Irrawaddy website in 2017. Ranong, a border town, has one of the highest densities of migrants, most having left their country seeking better economic and educational opportunities. Inaccessibility to education, along with high rates of child labour, HIV and human trafficking are prevalent here. The rates of educated migrant youth are alarming, with only 20 per cent of the 20,000 Myanmar migrant children in Ranong estimated to start school and the majority (90 per cent) of these finishing school at age 12.

### Barriers to Schooling

The reasons for these astounding figures are complex and varying, but are rooted in poverty. Many migrants aspire to stay in education but work or family responsibilities take precedence. For many families there is

ongoing conflict between short-term survival and the long-term investment of education. Often short-term needs are prioritised over education, while others sacrifice much to be able to afford education. Upon meeting one student's mother, I was moved to the point of tears to learn that she would rather go hungry sometimes so that her son could continue his studies – demonstrating her strong belief in and commitment to education. For others, the guilt of prioritising education over helping their families is too high.

Children as young as 10 sometimes work to support their families instead of going to school. Alongside this are concerns around gaining valid legal documents to remain safely in Thailand. Fees for such documents are expensive, often costing more than a month's salary, so many young people work to earn enough to pay for them.

Gender and order in the family both influence education accessibility. Numbers of boys and girls in MAF's pre-school and secondary school programmes are roughly similar. However, the gender mix changes as students age, with the majority in the academic English and online

university programme (run by Australian Catholic University) being young women. This may be perplexing to an outsider. Boys and girls experience different pressures which can divert them from starting or continuing education. Girls are often expected to care for younger siblings or sick family members, whereas boys can be required to undertake physical work (such as working on rubber plantations) to support the family.

Conversely, there are also differing factors which may influence parents' decisions for their children to remain in education: teenage girls are more vulnerable to human trafficking and prostitution, whereas the risk of becoming involved in drugs and alcohol may be higher for boys. The privilege of attending school may be possible for only some children in the family. Often older siblings work in low-skilled "dirty, difficult and dangerous" jobs in the fishing industry, construction, agriculture and low-paid service sector. Many work in ice, charcoal or fish processing factories, while their younger siblings — luckier in this respect — are given education opportunities.

### Desire for Education

Migrant families see education as a potential pathway out of poverty and exploitation: a chance to improve their lives, have different experiences and gain knowledge. One student, whose parents experienced financial hardship and civil war says: "Education makes my vision clearer." She sees education as an opportunity to help her family through sharing knowledge, obtaining a good job and becoming a better person.

Through their values of love, compassion and service, the Marists aid the most abandoned and marginalised in communities. Forced to leave Northern Myanmar in 2006, they realised there was a great need to support Myanmar migrants across the border. Endeavouring to combat the root causes of entrenched poverty in migrant communities, they identified a need for education and health assistance in Ranong and so established the Marist Centre here in 2013. The Marists provide a welcoming place

where migrant children and families can feel supported and access education. In addition to the programmes mentioned above, the school also provides migrant worker weekend classes taught by school graduates themselves.



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Building on the Marists' strong foundation, the multicultural staff, which currently includes people from Thailand, Myanmar, Philippines, Cameroon and New Zealand, bring their range of experiences, cultures and languages to help nurture thinkers, communicators and leaders. The Marist presence, currently comprising three priests, one brother and a seminarian, as well as two Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, is strengthened by local and foreign staff. Myanmar teachers, many of whom are MAF graduates themselves, are inspirational role models, giving back to their community. Thai teachers ensure students can communicate effectively in the local language, while foreign volunteers foster English, social studies and university learning, bringing broader perspectives to the students, many of whom have never left Ranong.

### Access to Teaching Resources

The students and graduates are the fruit of school, developing values, skills and knowledge which are vital assets for their future. Graduates are able to communicate in three languages — Burmese (the majority language in Myanmar), Thai and English (globally

important and the official language of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Teenagers in New Zealand might be surprised to learn that many of the students do not have smartphones or computers and internet at home. However, with a fully-equipped computer classroom at MAF and talented teachers, the students learn essential technological skills, including directing, acting and producing videos featuring measures of social justice and anti-bullying. The values of love, respect and compassion are woven into learning in a myriad of ways, including through involvement in projects to solve social and environmental problems in their community.

### Sharing Education

Equipped with knowledge, skills and confidence, graduates are keen to share their education and help others, with many teaching migrant workers English, Thai and computer skills on their weekends. The fruit of the school thus becomes a seed, which disperses and grows throughout the community. Graduates become teachers, or work for non-governmental organisations such as World Vision and the International Organisation for Migration and in local businesses. Some return to Myanmar. In this way, it feels as though we are helping to educate a community, while addressing the root causes of poverty. The school is like a tree: the Marists provide structure and support, teachers cultivate confidence and encourage learning, and graduates assist others in the community to learn. Education is imperative, for those like the sleepy boy in my English class, to help improve lives and create communities free of exploitation and poverty. 📖

For information about the school:  
[www.facebook.com/maristasiafoundation](https://www.facebook.com/maristasiafoundation)

Photo left: By Chinh Je Duc on Unsplash  
 Above: by Aleisha Keating



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