

# Thailand's Kings School: Empowering Disadvantaged Youth Through Education Amidst Adversity

Henry Birt  
20 August 2022.

Rajaprajanugroh 24 School, situated in Phayao in northern Thailand, stands as an institution established by the Thai government to commemorate King Bhumibol Adulyadej's 60th coronation. Despite his passing in 2016, King Adulyadej remains deeply revered across Thailand, and his enduring legacy thrives, notably through the network of 45 'King's schools' dispersed throughout the nation.

Despite the grandiose connotation of their name, the King's schools are designed to cater to children from underprivileged backgrounds, providing them with an education that encompasses both academic and practical skills. These institutions, which are all boarding schools, operate on a tuition-free basis.

RPK 24 predominantly consists of orphans and children hailing from the hill tribes surrounding Phayao. Without the existence of RPK 24, these children would face significant barriers in accessing and affording education.

When embarking on the journey to teach, the program was in its early stages. Alongside a group of 11 other students, we became the first volunteers from Cardiff University, teaching English to students ranging from 4 to 18 years old.

Throughout the month we spent at the school, our task was to assist students, spanning from primary school to sixth form age equivalents, in improving their English proficiency in both written and spoken forms. However, from the outset, it became evident that the curriculum relied on slightly outdated teaching methods, primarily employing simple 'listen and repeat' activities, which research has shown to be less effective in enhancing language skills.

Despite this, the teachers showed enthusiasm in acquiring new skills and implementing different activities that could aid students in grasping the essence of the language. Simultaneously, as volunteers, we made concerted efforts to learn as much Thai as possible. This endeavour aimed to effectively communicate our ideas and comprehend the perspectives of both teachers and students, thereby enhancing overall efficiency in the teaching process.

The teachers at the school, much like the students, reside on the premises. Their daily routine starts early, typically commencing at 5 am when the students begin a 2-mile jog around the school grounds. In the evenings, the teachers rotate to have an hour for themselves before assisting the students in preparing for bedtime and ensuring 'lights out'.

Following lessons, we were encouraged to organise extracurricular activities, such as sports and games. It was during these sessions that we formed deeper connections with the students. While each child had a unique story reflecting the harsh realities of the world, there was one student who left a lasting impression. To protect their privacy, their name will be withheld. This particular student had faced unimaginable hardships from a young age, enduring the loss of both parents and suffering abuse from caregivers. Despite these

tremendous challenges, the student exhibited remarkable proficiency in English and displayed exceptional intelligence.

The bond between this student and several volunteers deepened significantly over the month, driven not by pity but by sheer admiration for the person they were. During our conversations, I inquired about their aspirations after completing school. They expressed their dream of securing a scholarship to attend university. However, they also confided that without such financial support, affording university education would be an impossible feat.

Two years remained until this student would graduate from RPK, prompting discussions with the teachers about the available possibilities to support an individual of such remarkable talent in reaching their full potential. Many of us queried about a sponsorship from either ourselves or Cardiff University to help the student.

Many of the students at the school face challenging family situations, relying entirely on the school for support. Despite their circumstances, the genuine affection and concern they exhibit towards the volunteers, underscore the resilience and strength inherent in individuals facing adversity.

Volunteering at Rajaprajanugroh 24 School was a profound immersion into the transformative force of education and resilience. This Kings school, despite its humble appearance, stands as a beacon of hope for underprivileged children, offering a chance at a brighter future.

The dedication of the teachers, despite an outdated syllabus, was commendable.

The experience highlighted societal disparities, emphasising education's pivotal role in fostering unity and supporting the marginalised - a poignant reminder echoing the imperative for compassion and solidarity within our communities.