Everyone likes a story with a happy ending. But there is none here. This account of Som-prasong Mang-ana's drive to educate the disadvantaged is a bittersweet tale.

Somprasong Mang-ana, left, and a teacher celebrate the Thai New Year with two students. COURTESY OF UMPHANG WITTHAYAKHOM SCHOOL

Somprasong is the director of Umphang Witthayakhom School in Umphang, in Tak province.

Umphang lies in the southernmost district of Tak province, on the Thai-Burmese border. It is one of the least accessible districts in Thailand. Tak town is located 426km from Bangkok, while Umphang is 248km from the provincial capital.

"Due to its location and inaccessibility, not many people are willing to come to teach here," said Somprasong.

"Our school has faced the most critical crisis of the teacher manpower shortage, but nothing can be done since there are no positions available."

When Somprasong first took up the director's post at the school, the teacher-student ratio was 18 teachers to 398 students. This has soared to the current ratio of 21 teachers to 1,023 students.

"It's so ironic. There are more students but fewer teachers," he said.

Teachers at the school are required to teach two to three subjects, plus take care of the boarders.

"I don't know if I did the right thing recruiting more students than there are funding and teachers to accommodate them. What I do know is that these students would never get a chance to study if we hadn't helped them.

"As teachers, we have to do what we can for our students."

In 2001, Somprasong scored the highest mark in a nationwide examination for school directors.
His success gave him the privilege to select which school he wanted to work in from a list of institutions across Thailand.

Despite its lesser appeal in terms of inconvenient location and poor facilities, Kamphaeng Phet-born Somprasong chose Umphang Witthayakhom School as his No. 1 preferred place of employment.

"I saw despair in the eyes of the teachers and the students and so I wanted to help," he said.

Somprasong was one of four teachers honoured by the Thai Ministry of Education in 2007 for "teaching spirit and devotion to work" in commemoration of World Teachers' Day, which falls annually on Oct 5.

World Teachers’ Day was created by Unesco to honour teachers’ commitment to education.

Somprasong received special praise from the Ministry of Education for his campaign to provide education opportunities to marginalised children in Tak.

He travels to remote villages to persuade parents to send their children to his school and helps needy parents with schooling expenses from his own pocket.

The Thai education system provides free, nine-year compulsory education from primary to lower-secondary school levels.

The state’s allocation does not cover textbooks, uniforms, schools meals and items such as pens and exercise books.

Somprasong donates his 5,600 baht monthly academic entitlement allowance toward the education of his students and seeks all kinds of donations to help them remain in the classroom.

He takes care of the fees and expenses for his 178 schoolchildren who do not have legal status and therefore aren't entitled to funding from the Thai government.

He also provides shelter to poor students who live too far away to commute on a daily basis. To date, he has helped finance the education of 325 boarders and is helping to cover their expenses for everything from detergent powder to clothes.

Funding is so tight that teachers cook for students, as they cannot afford to hire a cook.

"The school’s rice stocks will run out in May 2009 and so we will have no food to feed the students after that," he said.

Somprasong encourages his students to make souvenirs for sale to tourists and to give cultural performances so that they are more self-reliant.

He has also created a "surrogate parent scheme", in which individuals can donate 300 baht per month to a student for personal expenses.

"Hardship brings enlightenment. I remember the day when I had only 100 baht in my pocket to pay for my students' meals," Somprasong said.

Somprasong wrote several letters to the government to request for extra funds for poor students. His persistence paid off, and he managed to get an allowance of 11 baht per day for meals for these disadvantaged children.

The 54-year-old teacher has been at the school for eight years. He has six years left before retirement.

"The government needs to formally step in to systematically provide better help to remote schools, particularly those on the border," he said.
"All children should have the equal right to education and access to education, as well as equal opportunities and treatment."

When asked if he has ever felt like abandoning his cause, Somprasong said: "As the team leader, I can't. If I express it either through my facial expressions or my behaviour, my teachers would notice it and lose heart, and would not be able to carry on."

Somprasong told of a student of illegal status who disappeared after graduation. The student came back to pay respect to him during the Thai New Year festival.

"He said it was because of me that he could speak English and make a living as a cloth seller in Pattaya, although he is still an illegal [immigrant]."

"To see children going to school is a reward. This career has given me an opportunity to help those with fewer opportunities; those who are hopeless and thought they wouldn't get a chance to study. Education lights up peoples' lives and enriches their existence.

"Today is [a day of] happiness. I'm so very happy to see the lights in the eyes of my students."

More than 18 million new primary teachers are needed worldwide to reach the goal of universal primary education, according to The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008: Education for All by 2015.

Issues such as high pupil-teacher ratios of 40:1 or more, which are detrimental to the quality of teaching and learning, will be discussed at the 4th World Teachers' Day celebration in Bangkok from Dec 8 to 11, and at the 12th Unesco-Apeid International Conference: Quality Innovations for Teaching and Learning event, co-organised by Apeid, Unesco and the Thai Ministry of Education. For more information, visit http://www.unescobkk.org/education/apeid/conference .

For donations and information, email Somprasong at umphangs@hotmail.com, or visit http://www.umphangs.com.

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