

Getting a grounding in the 'school of life'

Mechai Pattana students are taught to be decent, honest citizens with a sense of sharing who also possess the ability to think for themselves as well as learning occupational skills, writes Kornchanok Raksaseri

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When Satakamol Krongthong first noticed Mechai Pattana School, she wondered what was behind the "Buffalo Horns Gate" at the campus entrance. Little did she realise that after she was admitted to the school, her life would change forever.

Four years on, the 16-year-old Mathayom 4 student has broken out of her shell. From a girl who used to depend on her family, she is now both independent and dependable.

She owes her transformation to the Mechai Pattana School which has taught her and more than 100 other students life skills honed through a hands-on approach that produces young managers who are also independent and academically capable.

This secondary school in Lam Plai Mat district in the northeastern province of Buri Ram was founded on the principle of Mechai Viravaidya -- dubbed "Mr Condom" for driving a successful campaign to help reduce the country's birthrate in the early 1970s -- to push for an equally important grassroots agenda to alleviate poverty by promoting self-reliance and avoiding handouts.

Sitting on 100 rai of land that was a mango orchard along the Lammat River, the boarding school, established in 2008, has 165 students enrolled. Most are female.

School founder Mechai Viravaidya aims to eradicate poverty and promote self-dependent and human resource development.

The students and their parents plant trees and perform community service in lieu of tuition fees. Each of them plants at least 400 trees and does 400 hours of community service each year. The school itself is dubbed the Bamboo School for being built from bamboo.

The mantra of the school speaks volumes about its priorities; to teach and train youth to be decent and honest citizens with a sense of sharing and who also possess life as well as occupational skills. The young students also learn to be goal-oriented and not to give up easily.

At the same time, the students try their hand at running a small business at the school to understand the first steps of being entrepreneurial. They participate also in community development activities with awareness instilled about gender equality.

Jittinee Khamnin, chairperson of the student committee, said it was no exaggeration to say that the school teaches students to be self-motivated, which in turn helps move the school forward.

"At our school, students are encouraged to do nearly everything. Teachers advise us but the [important] decisions are made principally by students, including student enrolment and the recruitment of teachers," said Ms Jittinee, the Mathayom 6 leader of the 23-member committee.

Sometimes tough decisions are placed before the committee, such as the penalties to be imposed on wayward students and the selection of applicants seeking placement in the school.



"Some applicants are highly qualified, which also makes them suitable to study in other schools. On the other hand, other less qualified applicants may be better qualified for admission here because they have the potential to adjust themselves and make the most of the educational opportunities the school offers," she said, adding admission rules and criteria can be modified.

The current batch of 34 new students was selected from among 126 applicants. The members are evaluated based on how well they adjust to the committee's work. They must demonstrate they can adequately take on the tasks of the committee and their grades must not suffer as a result.

Turning to punishing fellow students, she said it is no piece of cake meting out penalties for different kinds of violations.

"Should we punish first-time violators with the same degree of severity as repeat offenders who commit a similar wrongdoing?" she asked.

The committee can also propose projects or consider those put forward by the students. The projects are a reality lesson that helps prepare students for real life in the future.

The proposals and ideas are rated by the committee before they are put into practice. The projects are weighed on the basis of how well thought-out they are and if they relate to business. Then the calculation of costs and marketing strategies are taken into account, Ms Jittinee said.

Two of the latest projects have to do with setting up a sign language class and a fund-raising scheme for victims of the recent dam collapse and flooding in Laos.

The budgets for such projects come from either the school budget or funds generated by businesses the students run at school which go to a central savings fund.

This fund is also made available as loans to parents and community members as well as students who want to invest in a private business.

Each day starts with chanting and meditation while academic classes end at 1.30pm. The hours after lunch are freed up for activities including farming.

As the school is positioned as a life-long learning centre and a hub for community development, an organic farm is up and running where students come together to grow hydroponic vegetables, lime, bananas and mushrooms and raise layer chickens.

Each student is delegated a specific task to do on the farm, which teaches them about responsibility.

As the school projects bring in money, the students are instilled with the habit of how to save and manage finances. Part of the funds are offered as low-interest loans to people in the community. The students are able to see for themselves that money can grow and be put to help people in need of financial aid.

The students take part in the running of the "school resort", which is a lodging opened to paying customers. The students have to balance the accounts and help with the maintenance of the resort.

Despite a tight schedule in executing and following up on the reality-lesson projects, the students have access to science and technology subjects. Many of them may be busy tending crops in the school plots, but science does not fall by the wayside.

In fact, students study anatomy and physiology with the aid of the state-of-the-art 3D immersive technology. Those in secondary-level classes are given a head start in practising plant tissue cultivation without having to get into university to do it.

Motivated to be critical thinkers, the students are exposed to two-way communication and interactive learning classes where questions are raised with teachers and there is open debate on issues of interest.

Mr Mechai, meanwhile, said the Association of Small Community Schools of Thailand has asked Mechai Pattana School to guide the association's member schools and turn them into centres for lifelong learning and for community development.

A total of 168 schools throughout 40 provinces are modelled on Mechai Pattana. They operate projects such as the School Social Enterprise Vegetable Farms and the Student and Parent Business Loan Funds to eradicate poverty and reduce labour migration.

The funds to create the schemes are contributed by companies and conglomerates such as IKEA, Shell, Siam Industrial Wire, Magnolia and ThaiBev, he said.

"The most recent recognition of the Bamboo School's worth was the adoption of the Partnership School Project where the private sector is asked to team up with and help operate state schools through the adoption of many important concepts of the Bamboo School," he said.

The first 100 schools joining the project this year will advance towards becoming Lifelong Learning Centres for all citizens as well as hubs for social and economic advancement in the communities surrounding those schools.

The student-centric approaches to learning, teaching and school management will also be introduced in the Partnership Schools. The project, approved by a government committee chaired by the prime minister, was launched on July 4, this year, he said.

"This year there are 165 students [at Mechai Pattana], of which three-fifths are girls and the remainder boys from 30 provinces as well as one student from Laos.

"[This month,] we expect to welcome two students each from Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar," Mr Mechai said.

Speaking of the alumni, Mr Mechai said many studied various courses at university, ranging from education, engineering, architecture, veterinary sciences, accounting, tourism and hospitality and social entrepreneurship to business and agriculture.

Just as the school has given its students a tremendous boost in academic and life skill lessons, Ms Jittinee said senior students exit the Buffalo Horns Gate and the Dragon Bridge after graduation equipped with both textbook knowledge and confidence.

They have been prepared for what life throws at them, according to the student.



All the school buildings, including the library, are built from bamboo. This is why the school has also been dubbed the Bamboo School.



'The Shrine of Metta' has been put in place for students to pray and wish others well.



A student, right, instructs a school guest how to use 3D immersive learning technology.



Mechai Pattana School was founded in 2008 as a boarding school for Mathayom 1-6 students who are encouraged to take part in community development



A student grows plants in a wheelchair with the help of a friend. Each student has to experience life in a wheelchair to understand the difficulties of people with disabilities.



A sign echoing the school founder's campaign for family planning is seen next to a solar cell panel, which is a source of power for the school