

Considering Education

Emma De Vynck, Sept. 28, 2016

KSDC began as a response to limited educational opportunities for Karenni people, both within Karenni (Kayah) State and in the two Karenni-majority camps on the Thai-Myanmar border. Over 300 KSDC graduates have gone on to profound work in community organizations and political groups within the camps and inside Karenni State. The students I work with have similar ambitions--"I want to help my community".



Education in Myanmar's eastern Karenni State is limited. Many KSDC students are from villages in Karenni State, where primary school education has only become free as of 2013. It's common for students to leave home and live in boarding houses in larger towns while they study. Conflict in Karenni State and discrimination against its ethnic minorities has further limited access to education.

If youth hope to complete education beyond primary or middle school, but cannot financially access education in Myanmar, they may travel to camps, where education up to high school is free. Most of KSDC's current Advanced Course students did just that; they left home and moved in with relatives or enrolled in boarding houses at a nearby camp. Camp education has its own challenges, where teacher training is limited and salaries are low.

After completing high-school, some students pursue further education at schools like KSDC or Karenni National College (KnNC)--which is just down the road from us. These schools, and others like them, are often not recognized by Thai or Myanmar education ministries.

Both KSDC and KnNC emphasize subjects like management, computers, and English. These subjects provide pragmatic and relevant learning for students after graduation, when they might go on to work in community offices.

Post-secondary is challenging to access without funds. Some students may be accepted at schools like Wide Horizons, where you can amp up your English abilities, or apply for programs to study abroad. English proficiency is a big factor in opening further educational opportunities.

KSDC students display strong ambition and vitality--a sort of zest that I resonate with as a fellow young person. Indeed, the many commonalities I see among KSDC youth and youth in Canada make it all the more absurd that so many Karenni have profoundly limited access to educational opportunities. This must be acknowledged...but the ways in which people "make it work" must also be acknowledged. KSDC student La Pleh's education journey is but one example of the diverse ways individuals make education happen.

La Pleh's education journey

La Pleh strikes me as a serene fellow, whose calm, welcoming presence somehow intersects with his passionate communication style. He recently completed a need assessment project and report about education in the camp. I was curious to know a bit about his education journey.



La Pleh (left) and his friend Soe Reh having dinner together

La Pleh's education began in Karenni State, Myanmar. He is from the Kayan ethnic group (considered a sub-group of the Karenni people), and has spent much of his life with relatives in various Kayan villages. He left his parents at a young age to live with his grandparents. In his grandparents' village, he attended primary school, but the costs of education were a challenge for his family. "School was easy for me", he shares, "but I didn't have enough books, pens, or uniforms." After two years in his grandparents' village, La Pleh went to live with an aunt's family, where he helped around the home, cooking and carrying the water for daily needs. Before and after school he would walk to a mountain to carry water. This rhythm was integrated into his school routine, bookends on a day of learning. In his small school, there were limited supplies, and students were usually only taught in the Kayan language, instead of Burmese, the most widely used language in Myanmar.

In 2009, La Pleh moved to a Kayan village situated very nearby Karenni Camp 1. He lived with other relatives there, and studied in the village school until he completed middle school. La Pleh then enrolled in high school in Karenni Camp 1. He encountered some challenges as he adjusted to high school. Not only was the camp school considerably larger than any of the small schools he had attended in the past, but most of the other students spoke Kayah, and all lessons were in Burmese—La Pleh had to rapidly familiarize himself with both Burmese and Kayah. Adjusting to a large school was a shock after years of studying with only a handful of other students in Kayan villages. "I was so confused—I asked, 'Who am I?' But I tried!"

La Pleh's vision caused him further educational challenges. He couldn't read the blackboard, so he struggled with assignments and tests that were based on blackboard learning. Still, he was able to academically shine on other assignments and most large exams.

When he was in grade nine, La Pleh met a KSDC alumni who left a strong impression on him—La Pleh was struck by this alumni's English skills and political thought. This impression fostered La Pleh's committed goal: to study at SDC. La Pleh went to on achieve his goal—he completed the SDC Basic Course and is now attending the Advanced Course.

La Pleh's keen political mind is unmistakable—he hopes to continue nurturing his political education through further studies. He also places particular value on his English learning, which he approaches with dedication and good humor. I am forever grateful that he brought the phrase "spread too thin" to KSDC.

La Pleh's education journey is unique, but many other Karenni students share similar threads—financial challenges, moving among relatives, living in boarding houses.

The students also have a shared commitment and willingness to receive and offer knowledge. *Knowledge is to be shared*—that's an undeniable theme among KSDC students.

My often consumptive learning approach is convicted by this ethos: *our knowledge is for sharing, and for helping our community.*

Myanmar Education Resources/Organizations (a few of many great existing projects!)

- Mote Oo: Provide training and free Myanmar-context curriculum
 - <http://www.moteoo.org/>
- Curriculum Project: Provide training and many free Myanmar-context curriculum
 - <http://curriculumproject.org/>
- Educasia: supports Myanmar education development and provides free curriculum
 - <http://educasia.org/>