

Teachers persevere with uphill task to teach highlands children

By [Thanh Lam, Hoang Phuong](#) January 13, 2021 / 08:15 pm GMT+7

"Are your legs okay?" This is usually the first thing her husband asks her when Le Thi Hong Tham is back home from work.

And quite often, Tham's response is to roll up her pants above the ankles, revealing several bruises and scars – a result of accidents that happen frequently as she travels from Coc My Commune, Bat Xat District to Seo Phin Than Village in the northern highlands province of Lao Cai. Tham and another colleague stay in the village to teach local children.

"It is not that far, only 12 km, but the roads are very difficult. I have never seen such roads in my life," says Tham, smiling as she talked about the trouble she has to take to teach children of the Mong and Dao ethnic minorities in a remote area. The difficulties begin right from getting to the kindergarten.

With an old motorbike, Tham has to navigate rocky and steep roads to get to Seo Phin Than. One teacher decided to quit for good, local authorities say.



The road to Seo Phin Than. Video by VnExpress/Anh Tuan.

Coc My Commune has 17 villages, four of them having borders with China. More than half of its 1,060 households are poor. Seo Phin Than village, home to Mong people, stands farthest from the commune center, 17 km away.

From the commune's kindergarten, a local officer points his finger to a small spot among a sea of clouds, saying, "that is the kindergarten and primary school of Seo Phin Than."

Some people standing next to him think it is a joke. But after two hours of driving on a rocky road to get there, they discover otherwise.

In Seo Phin Than, the kindergarten and primary school are located at the village's highest point. The kindergarten consists of a classroom, a room for two teachers, and a dining area. The main area of 32 square meters serves as both classroom and a sleeping room for 37 children aged from 3-5.

Such special schools, having up to 3-4 classes for children of different ages, are a feature of many mountainous areas in Vietnam where children face a lot of difficulties in getting an education.

According to the Ministry and Education and Training, such schools are required to meet several criteria including play rooms, rooms for physical activities, including art work, and a playground with equipment for students' outdoor activities. The school in Seo Phin Than meets none of these conditions.



The kindergarten in Seo Phin Than Village, Lao Cai Province. Photo by VnExpress/Anh Tuan.

The number of students attending the kindergarten usually increases to 42 since many children carry their young siblings, mostly aged two, to the school. At meal time, Tham and her colleague, Hien, often have to find bowls and spoons to feed the kids. Teachers like Tham and Hien have become used to this unusual change in their class size. Last week, a Mong mother carrying a baby on her back took her older child to the school and asked Tham to take care of both of them. However, Tham could not accommodate this request since she was already overwhelmed.

The teachers' 10-sq-meter "bedroom" has a bed and two small chairs. After lunch, they take wooden panels from their bed to the classroom and lie down there so as to keep an eye on the sleeping students.

The school, such as it is, was built with a lot of hard work by the community. Village head Lau A Va says that in 2012, the strongest men were asked to go to the forest and bring wood to build a classroom for local children.

The old school, a km away from the current one, was damaged by a storm. So locals decided to move it to the highest hill in the village. It took them six months to finish building the so-called new school, almost a makeshift structure.

The school should have been more solid, but trucks could not reach the village, so all cement bags and iron rods had to be carried by motorbikes, Va said.

"The cork roofs are a huge improvement," he said. The village has 58 households, 23 of which are poor. Their incomes mostly come from harvesting corn.

With more than 300 residents, the village's per capita income is less than VND1 million (\$43.37) per month.

Last September, Tham visited many households and informed about fees of slightly more than VND100,000 (\$4.34).

They nodded their heads and left for their farms without saying a word. Tham and Hien had to use their own money to help them.

Missing their own children

Sometimes, as she watches parents walk their children home at sunset, Tham cannot help crying as she longs for her son and daughter, living in Coc My Commune with her husband, a busy miner.

The couple have to ask the help of colleagues and friends in taking care of their own offspring.

"My colleagues take care of my children; I come here to take care of others' children," Tham said, tears in her eyes.



The classroom of the kindergarten is decorated with colored paper and stickers. Photo by VnExpress/Anh Tuan.

There is no electricity in Seo Phin Than, so the night is dark and silent. After having dinner and cleaning the classroom, Tham walks to a higher point to "catch" some signal and call her children.

"A package of rice, a package of vegetables and meat, and a phone with a full battery" are indispensable items Tham and Hien carry when they return to Seo Phin Than from their homes. Sometimes, they also bring some candy, colored paper and national flags.

The small building with a heavily damaged roof has not stopped Tham and Hien from making it become the most beautiful one on the way heading to the village.

Inside, they use floral wallpaper to cover peeling parts of the walls. Outside, dozens of sandals, covered with mud, are placed neatly on a shelf. Flowers always bloom in the front yard.

Many children in Coc My Commune are not fluent in Vietnamese, but they never forget the songs that Tham and Hien teach them.

The good thing about teaching these children, Tham said, is that they love going to school. Their parents, busy with farming, rarely have time for their minors during the day.

Apart from teaching them to read and sing, Tham and Hien also cut their fingernails, wash their faces, help them wear clothes, and clean their hands. Sometimes, when their parents come late, the teachers take care of the children until the evening.

Locals have found it easier to focus on their farming since Tham and Hien started working in Seo Phin Than. Thanks to the duo, their children now can sing, read, and greet their teachers.

The teachers still yearn for a better place for their students, a bigger classroom, a bigger kitchen and more firewood in winter.

And of course, they hope they will not have to refuse any parents who want to have their children taken care of by the teachers. Every child has the right to learn and the teachers say they are willing to shoulder all the extra work it entails in remote areas. Unlike in urban areas, Tham and Hien receive no flowers and greeting cards from the parents, but they are always grateful for the occasional gifts of eggs, corn and meat. Sometimes, when it rains hard, the parents rush to the school to see if the teachers are okay.

Tham said: "Their gratitude and concern is how they motivate us, and nothing can be more precious than that."