

Accredited Non-formal Basic Education for Out-of-School Migrant Children in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Recent reports on out-of-school children in Thailand suggest that providing alternative education for migrant children is urgently needed. More than 10% of Thailand's out-of-school children (OOSC) were found in the Thailand-Myanmar border districts of Tak province. Thus, migrant learning centers (MLCs), established by the migrant community, are an important alternative service provider, providing learning opportunities for the marginalized out-of-school migrant children. This qualitative case study discovered the roles of MLCs in providing alternative approaches to basic education including the accredited non-formal primary education for children of Myanmar migrant workers. The study gives insight to policymakers and practitioners to consider the importance of MLCs and to enhance the competencies of MLCs especially in providing quality basic education for OOSC.

Keywords: *Migrant learning centers, Non-formal primary education, Out-of-school children.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The international migration movements, as well as the intra-migration within the region of ASEAN countries, have dramatically increased in recent decades. Migration, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), is the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a state [1]. Especially international migration, the rapid economic growth, the influx of foreign direct investment, and the increase of exports have created large-scale labor demands and accelerated the flow of labor from neighboring countries. As of 2015, Thailand was the top country hosting 3.6 million people from other ASEAN member states [2]. The number of inbound migrants has increased to almost 5 million in 2018. This includes 3.9 million cross-border migrant workers from three neighboring countries, namely Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, by several migration patterns. The migrant workers from these three countries filled an estimated 10% of Thailand's total labor force [3].

Not only adult migrant workers, but also the number of child migrants is high in Thailand. Ministry of Interior

estimated that about 390,000 were child laborers and children of migrant workers [4], [5]. ILO indicated that child labor is frequently linked with educational marginalization [6]. The report entitled "Strengthening OOSC Mechanisms in Tak" [5] revealed that nationwide, more than 240,000 school-aged children between 7 to 15 years old in Thailand are out of school. This population includes the children at pre-primary, primary, and lower-secondary levels who are out of school, or at risk of dropping out. More than 10 % of them (24,776) are found in Tak province's five border districts of Thailand with Myanmar [5].

Even though Thailand's commitment to achieving Education for All (EFA) has shown some positive outcomes towards the education of migrant children, about 200,000 school-aged migrant children are still out of school. As Martin urged "Labour migration is a process to be managed and not a problem to be solved" [7]. The change of government policies following global and regional commitments including government schools officially accepting migrant children and providing certificates of graduation had resulted in the achievement of about half of migrant children attending state schools. However, Barriers to accessing state education are still in place for many migrant children. For Myanmar migrant

children in Thailand, barriers to mainstream formal education relate to language competency and unstable legal status, family mobility, and lack of documentation. Additionally, there is a strong willingness of the migrant community in preserving the Myanmar language and culture as opposed to attending a Thai public school [3], [8]–[10]. Thus, this study aimed to explore the roles of MLCs in providing alternative approaches to basic education including the accredited non-formal primary education for children of Myanmar migrant workers.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Non-formal Education

Non-formal education (NFE) is an approach to complement the formal education system. Recognizing that the traditional education system alone is not sufficient to address the educational needs of all children, nations have developed provisions to apply alternative and flexible learning approaches to enable wider educational access for out-of-school children. The learning activities in NFE programs include short training to standardized qualifications. Various practitioners have stated that non-formal education is a form of education that is institutionalized, intentional, and planned by the education provider [11], [12].

Acknowledgment of the importance of non-formal education increased as it became recognized as alternative education outside the formal system [11]. The characteristic of non-formal education nowadays is that it is an additional, alternative complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals which often provided to guarantee the right of access to education for all [11]–[14]. Rogers [12] described that three types of non-formal education affiliating to formal education have emerged since the 1990s. These are complementary education, supplementary education, and alternative education. Complementary non-formal education programs serve as an equivalent form of formal education which targets those who missed formal education opportunities. Supplementary education provides additional education or training. The third type of non-formal education provides the alternative to formal education through a relevant and more appropriately-modified curriculum which targets older populations who missed the chance to attend formal education [12].

The global education initiative agreements, particularly EFA goals and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), have accelerated non-formal education as a policy focus of the international community with several acknowledgments. Bringing non-formal education within the formal education system, promoting cooperation and collaboration among the stakeholders are the recommended practices of non-formal education by the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children [18]. The

significance of non-formal education appears in two contexts. The first context is in the development of occupational training and the second is in educational reform agendas to give alternative education opportunities for those who missed the formal education [12]. Many countries around the world recognize non-formal education as a pathway to further education. The Council of Europe [15] considers non-formal education as a means of integrating children and youth into society. The features relating to the creation of non-formal systems and their perspectives are taken into account as solutions to the current educational difficulties of immigrant children. Key concepts in features of NFE in Thailand are influenced by the agendas for achieving universal primary education for all children (EFA), the Right to Education, and the collective commitments of the ASEAN declaration on out of school children and youth (OOSCY) [16].

2.2 Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) in Thailand

The migrant community established migrant learning centers (MLCs) in order to provide learning opportunities for marginalized groups. Individuals, communities, and organizations have taken action to respond to the education needs of out-of-school children and youths. Despite operating for decades, MLCs are not fully recognized as part of either Myanmar or Thai formal education systems but in some cases, they are regarded as non-formal education centers [4]. Since the 1990s, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of students graduating from the MLCs with unrecognized diplomas. Most of the MLCs follow the basic educational curriculum of Myanmar's Ministry of Education. However, some MLCs implement the Thai Government Non-formal Education (NFE) programs [4]. Currently, more than 16,000 children are attending 110 migrant learning centers as of the 2018-2019 Academic Year in Thailand. In a recent out of school children policy briefing, MLCs in Tak province are featured as a successful example of building working relations and initiating collaboration with the Thai Ministry of Education and the Myanmar Ministry of Education [17].

3. METHODS

The qualitative, exploratory case study design [18], [19] is applied to explore the roles of migrant learning centers in providing the alternative approach to basic education for out-of-school migrant children. Data is collected from various document sources, and semi-structured in-depth interviews with diverse groups of 26 participants including government officials, non-government officers, migrant education administrators, facilitators, and teachers from multiple sites. An inductive approach, the constant comparative method

[20] is used for analyzing the data, identifying patterns, and discovering theoretical properties in the data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study found MLCs to be taking important roles in the implementation of the continuing education and equivalency programs which widening the opportunities to reach the out-of-school migrant children's access to quality education. MLCs have been providing access to education for marginalized migrant children since the 1990s. The migrant educators and coordinating organization explained the difficulties of not having accreditation of students' learning at MLCs.

I had seen that my students received an education, they can read, write and they can do basic calculations [arithmetic]. With no recognition, they were not placed in the correct grade level. When they returned home or attempted to attend Thai public school, they had to start from G1..

Realizing the education and training systems that only giving functional literacy skills and unrecognized education effects on educational attainment and efficiency of migrant children in long run, MLCs have initiated the collaboration with Myanmar education officials to implement the programs which lead to the accredited learning pathways. To provide quality basic education for all children in migrant communities, MLCs' educational partners such as the Migrant Education Coordination Center (MECC), Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (BMWEC), Burmese Migrant Teachers Association (BMTA), Help Without Frontiers (HwF), Migrant Education Integration Initiatives (MEII), World Education Thailand and Teacher Focus Myanmar have initiated activities towards the recognition of migrant education. Migrant education partners approached the educational ministries to find ways for recognition of migrant education and implemented the state level examining program so that the students can sit the Myanmar government state-level examinations for 3 levels - Primary (G4), Middle (G8), and Matriculation (G11). The state-level examination confirms the students' prior learning at MLCs, and they can continue their education in Myanmar. Inclusiveness for several groups of children, MLCs expand their classes for a number of education program implementations. Migrant educators learned that accelerated non-formal education needed to be used for out-of-school older children rather than regular grade-level schooling. Therefore, in addition to finding ways of recognition to the formal schooling system, MLCs also provide accredited non-formal education through relevant and specified services which target older populations who missed the chance to attend formal education for numerous reasons. A migrant education practitioner reported that: *We have implemented Myanmar formal basic education programs, Myanmar Non-formal*

Education programs, and we also have a Thai Non-formal Education program.

Some MLCs implemented the recognized non-formal education programs precisely Thai non-formal education (Thai NFE) and Myanmar non-formal primary education program (Myanmar NFPE) in a flexible schedule. These programs enable the out-of-school migrant children to return to schooling or to continue their education at the state schools respectively. The purpose of these two pathways is to provide a second chance of education to out-of-school children aged 10-14 years, and a chance of transitioning to mainstream education by providing the equivalent certified competencies as in the formal system. Myanmar NFPE is available to migrant children in Thailand through the partnership between the Myanmar Literacy Resource Center (MLRC), Department of Alternative Education (DAE), and migrant education implementation partners such as World Education (WE), Help without Frontiers (HwF), UNICEF and UNESCO.

5. CONCLUSION

Migrant learning centers (MLCs) have been taking significant roles in the migrant community by performing the various functions including initiating accredited educational pathways for migrant children and building a strong stakeholder engagement. MLCs are established and managed by local communities with technical support from various agencies and are funded by local and international non-government organizations for more than two decades. By their unique nature, MLCs adapt their activities to local needs, context, and available resources accordingly. MLCs have gradually accelerated the development of continuing education for migrant children from providing basic literacy training to a system of accredited learning pathways.

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