Negotiating curricula for Burma migrant schooling in Thailand

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Abstract

Semi-legal Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) provide education for many of the children of migrant workers from Burma in Thailand. The paper reports research into the interaction of these centres with the Thailand educational authorities, particularly negotiations over their curricula. The research aimed to clarify what curricula were being offered to the migrant children, and why. It was based on interviews with many MLC leaders and staff and other stakeholders, and participant observation of interactions. It found that their curricula are diverse products of compromises among many interests. More research and action is needed to promote the basic right of all children to an adequate education.

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1. Introduction

There are roughly three million migrant workers in Thailand, of whom about two million lack legal work-permits (Thai Government sources cited in IOM, 2012). The great majority are from Burma and a large number of these are from Karen, Shan and Mon states, where ethnic-based rebel movements have long been in conflict with the centralizing and authoritarian Burmese government. In Burma, many suffered from village relocations, land confiscation, forced labour and other abuses by government forces. People whose lives and livelihoods are disrupted and threatened in this way may seek in Thailand the status of ‘displaced person’ needing aid and protection in a ‘temporary shelter’, but this involves severe limitations on opportunities for work and movement, so most prefer to become migrant workers, whether legal or illegal. For a large proportion of these, it is a long-term way of life, in which they live in families with children who may have been born either in Burma or Thailand.

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What kind of schooling is available for migrant children? In 1999 the Government of Thailand acknowledged a duty to provide basic education ‘of quality and free of charge’ (Ministry of Education, 1999), and in 2005 clarified that this provision should include children who lack Thai nationality or civil registration (OEC, 2008, pp. 11–14). Many migrant children now attend Thai state schools, but many others do not. Although access to these schools is officially free and non-discriminatory, it imposes indirect economic costs which migrant families may find hard to bear; and perceived risks that it may make illegal migrants more vulnerable to deportation, punishment or harassment (Nongyao 2012a). In practice, also, migrant children often have difficulty finding schools, which will accept them, particularly if their command of Thai language is weak (ibid.).

An alternative education option exists in the form of Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs). These unofficial schools, mostly set up by members of the migrant communities, tend to be easier for the children to enter, and provide teaching which can be better suited to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Their founders and staff have tended to be critics of the authoritarian military regimes in power in Burma since 1962; indeed many are former activists involved in the 1988 uprising, who fled the country after the subsequent military backlash. They favour a more liberal pluralist system in Burma, and have attempted to bring this perspective to the MLCs.

Since 2005 the numbers of MLCs and students attending them have increased, as they have received more tolerance than before by the Thai authorities. Indeed, the Thai Ministry of Education has unofficially incorporated MLCs in its strategy regarding the educational rights of migrant children. It sees the MLCs as a potential vehicle for preparing migrant children to enter Thai state schools – cheaper than direct measures – by increasing their Thai language skills and aligning their learning attainments. Even where this does not work, the MLCs might have been seen as capable of fulfilling the children’s rights in an acceptable way, if they were subject to the authorities’ guidance and semi-formal regulation (Nongyao, 2012b).

Consequently, in several parts of Thailand since 2005 there have been processes of engagement between the MLCs and the government’s Primary Education Service Area (PESA) offices. These have involved direct and implicit negotiations on the contents of the curricula taught in the MLCs. But the processes have been lengthy and the outcomes complicated. There is apparently a fundamental difference of vision between the PESA offices – which see the MLCs as a bridge to meeting the migrants’ educational rights within the Thai system – and the MLC leaders, who are deeply concerned with the political and social future of Burma, and the prospect that many of their students will become active citizens there. As Michael W. Apple (2000) has pointed out, school curricula are always subject to political contestation as they create the corpus of ‘official knowledge’, which sets the terms of public discourse. MLC leaders are interested in creating a new public knowledge for Burma. They depend on a measure of goodwill from the Thai authorities, but do not always find the Thai interpretation of ‘quality’ in education highly relevant in the Burma context.

The present paper identifies important features of the process of discussion and contest over the MLC curricula – and its results – in the particular district location of Mae Sot, in Thailand’s Tak Province. Mae Sot close to Thailand’s border with Burma, and part of a wide area in which many people on both sides of the border are of Karen ethnicity. But, being close to an important crossing-place between the countries, Mae Sot town has long had a cosmopolitan nature (Lee 2007, 40–48). Nowadays the district has many migrant workers. Indeed, in Mae Sot migrants are thought to outnumber Thai nationals (Lee 2008, 191–194). Together with the neighbouring districts of Mae Ramat and Phop Phra the Thai Government designated the district in 2004 as forming a ‘border economic zone’ (Pongsawat 2007, 282–283). The use of cheap migrant labour in the industries of garment manufacture and agriculture is a key feature of this zonal strategy. Consequently, there is a particularly high concentration of MLCs in the district. According to the Tak PESA office, during 2011 the number was between 45 and 50, serving 8,000 – 10,000 enrolled students.
2. The objective of this research was to understand better what curricula the migrant children are being offered, and why. In particular, we sought to understand to what extent, and by what means, the MLC leaders defended their ability to use their curricula for the construction of public knowledge in the Burma context.

Research focused on the 12 MLCs in Mae Sot district, which came under the umbrella of BMWEC (the Burmese Migrant Workers’ Education Committee). BMWEC was created as a network between MLCs in 1999 and, although it is no longer the only such association, it is still an important voice in the sector. BMWEC provided introductions for the researcher to its affiliated learning centers. These centers comprise a diverse selection of MLCs, including the two largest ones in the district (which now offer post-grade-10 classes), and also institutions, which provide vocational training and night classes.

Leaders and teachers in these MLCs were interviewed with a particular view to finding out how their curricula had changed over time, and the reasons for the changes that had taken place. In order to understand the dynamics of the interaction between the MLCs and other stakeholders, officials from the PESA office and relevant aid agencies were also interviewed, and some of the meetings between representatives of the MLCs, PESA officials and aid agencies were attended and observed, between August 2011 and December 2012.

3. Findings

3.1. The initial curricula of MLCs

Most of the MLCs were established as ad hoc responses to immediate felt needs. In many cases, the most urgent need was to provide a place of safety for young children while their parents were working. Thus a consideration of formal academic curricula was not the top priority at that time. But, having found a place for the children to gather and spend time, there was clearly an opportunity to help them learn usefully. Much of what they were taught consisted of basic life skills, such as how to eat properly and keep clean. Often this extended to basic arithmetic and language skills. Sometimes the latter included simple functional Thai: useful words and phrases to use and to recognize (including the visual recognition of words in signs). Usually the language of instruction – and the main language being learnt – was either Karen or Burmese. It was likely to be Karen if all – or almost all – of the students and teachers were of Karen ethnicity. This was the case in three of the studied MLCs: Elpis, Ray Kaw Thoo and Hsa Tho Lei. But in most cases, the schools were open to students from more diverse ethnic backgrounds, and the main language of instruction was Burmese. Alongside education for basic functional needs the students were given a greater sense of their national communities in Burma.

The typical pattern of development of the MLCs was to progress from informal life-skills education to opening a class at Primary Level One, and then repeating it for a new intake of students while giving the original students a chance to progress to Level Two, and so on. This move required taking a more formal approach to curricula. Most of the MLCs drew heavily on the curriculum used in Burma, mainly because this was what the volunteer whom they could recruit as teachers best knew. Burmese textbooks could also be found and photocopied. However, in most the Burma curriculum was not adopted uncritically but frequently modified, removing parts, which promoted or justified ethnocentric and authoritarian attitudes.

Ray Kaw Thoo and Elpis – the MLCs using Karen language – adopted a curriculum developed by the Karen Education Department (KED). KED is linked with he Keren Nation Union rebel group and seeks to be ‘the governing body with regard to education of the Karen people’ (KED 2012). It has developed curricula which incorporate Karen culture and aspirations, and which are used in the ‘temporary shelters’ inside Thailand territory. Hsa Tho Lei, although it also mainly used Karen as a medium of learning, took a more eclectic approach to the
curriculum, making use of textbooks both from KED and the Burmese school system, but adhering to neither of them very systematically.

3.2. Pressures for reform after 2005

Pressures for further change to the MLC curricula came from several directions. On one side they reflected the demands of students for educational mobility. By the mid-2000s, several of the earliest-established MLCs, had grown with their initial cohorts of students, through to the completion of their primary education. Some of these students wished to continue to high school levels. But the demand was not broad enough for all of these MLCs to add high school sections. It had become clear that students would sometimes need to transfer from one MLC to another, and that, for this to work satisfactorily, there would have to be more standardization in the curricula being used, and a system of common accreditation for levels of education reached. And there was demand not only to facilitate transfers from one MLC to another, but also from MLCs to schools in Burma and in the Thai state system. Moreover, students should eventually have the opportunity of accessing higher education, which meant that they would need to obtain certified credentials of their educational attainment acceptable in higher education institutions. It must be noted, however, that these objectives of educational mobility were not all compatible with each other. For example, an MLC would not be able simultaneously to focus on helping students to enter the Burmese state educational system and the Thai one.

The apparently preferred model from the point of view of the Thai Ministry of Education (as expressed through its local PESA office) was for the MLCs to prepare students to enter the Thai state school system. The logic of this was that provision in the Thai system was the strongest symbol of the Thai state’s commitment to ensuring the education of all children within its borders, and the strongest assertion of its sovereign authority over what should be taught. But the Thai state has been unwilling to devote sufficient resources to provide for the effective teaching of non-Thai speakers within its own schools, probably for reasons both of economy and nationalism. This creates a gap between principle and practice, in which PESA engages with the MLCs as a temporary and semi-official fix for the problem. At the same time, the Thai authorities are especially concerned to make the MLCs to teach Thai language and Thai curriculum and prevent them from being used for teaching views which run against Thai state views and interests, for example in its treatment of the history of conflict between states in Burma and Thailand.

The idea of increasing compatibility with the Thai system has been popular with many migrant students and their families, who have seen this as their best chance of educational upward mobility. Improved proficiency in Thai language, in particular, has immediate functional benefits in their lives. On the other hand, the apparent moves toward political liberalization in Burma since its 2010 elections have increased the sense that the migrants may have a chance to flourish there if they return. This impression is affecting not only migrants themselves, but also the Thai government (which sees the future Burma less as an exporter of cheap labour and more as a site of investments and a market for Thailand’s industrial products), and international aid agencies.

3.3. Processes of reform

The Thai Government’s clarified commitment in 2005 to education for all migrant children led the PESA office in Mae Sot (as in some other parts of Thailand) to engage in closer dialogue with MLCs. In 2006 with the assistance of BMWEC it began holding regular forum meetings together with MLC leaders. At this stage PESA’s main substantive concerns seemed to be to ensure that the MLCs were not a threat to health and safety, and that they were not teaching Burmese versions of history and geography, which were detrimental to Thailand. But in order to gain a better overall grasp of MLC activities it was trying to put in place a system of reporting of such data as the numbers of students they were teaching at each level and the curricula being used. In this they were assisted by a UK-based, NGO – Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) – which provided technical assistance within both PESA and BMWEC.
This information-gathering provided material for a 2007 visit to Mae Sot and refugee camps by the head of the Secretariat of Basic Education in the Ministry of Education, which effectively launched a new initiative on MLC curriculum reform. She expressed the belief that further ministerial regulations would be in place by 2009, allowing MLCs to be legally recognized as schools for migrants. But in order to be registered as such, they would need to meet certain conditions. These included enabling students to speak Thai proficiently, and aligning their curricula to the Thai national curriculum in the key subjects of Maths, English and Science. As it turned out, no new ministerial regulations on schools for migrants were issued until 2012, and these were more restrictive than had been forecast.

But the official’s statement in 2007 nevertheless spurred both PESA office and MLCs to more urgent work on curriculum reform. World Education, an international non-governmental agency which had been working on improving the quality of education in the refugee camps, now offered to help develop a curriculum for the MLCs which would satisfy the Ministry of Education in the core subjects of mathematics, science and English. In this it was funded by the United States. Its initial approach was to translate the Thai curriculum and teaching materials into Burmese. But many of the MLC teachers complained that they could not use the results, because they were unfamiliar with the pedagogic style and content. World Education then agreed to a new method, using participatory workshops to help MLC teachers find working strategies to mediate between their previous sets of knowledge and skills and the standards that were expected by the Thai authorities. It was a laborious and lengthy process, and, although having the virtue of flexibility, leaves some confusion or ambiguity about exactly what is being taught at each stage in each MLC.

MLCs faced a similar problem in conforming to the stipulation that they should teach Thai language effectively. The PESA office with the help of World Education produced a set of ten textbooks for this. Although the MLCs accepted these in principle, they have often found it hard to use them in practice. Few of the migrant teachers know Thai very well, and few of the MLCs had sufficient funding to employ qualified native Thai teachers.

Some of the interviewed MLC leaders and teachers acknowledged that the obstacles to aligning their curricula more closely with that of that Thai state were not only the limitation of their human and financial resources. They considered that the futures of many students were more closely linked with Burma than Thailand, and wanted to provide schooling, which would help them reintegrate there, if and when they chose to return. For themselves, too, developing teaching skills and experience in a Burmese curriculum would ultimately be more useful than in a Thai one. Beyond this, their political beliefs made them wish to teach Burmese history, geography and other social studies in ways, which would promote a more liberal and equal society there. The increased focus on the curriculum from 2007 made them pay more attention to this matter, but in some respects rather than seeking to conform to the Thai system it was a matter of finding a stronger alternative to it. This pushed many of the MLCs to follow the Burmese curriculum (with political amendments) in a more consistent way than before, and reduced the use of Karen language and the KED curriculum. As a result of this, MLCs were able to work out an arrangement for mutually recognised certification of the academic attainments of their students, to enable student transfers between MLCs. At the same time, MLCs have co-operated with the PESA office in several special schemes for helping to transfer students to Thai state schools, although these have had limited success (Nongyao 2012b).

Increased official recognition of the MLCs; encouraged more international aid agencies to be involved in providing training to their teachers after 2007. This training has covered such topics as computer use, financial management, human rights, awareness of trafficking in drugs and human beings, traffic and labour law, psychology and the encouragement of critical thinking.

3.4. The current state of curricula

These processes since 2007 have resulted in greater uniformity of MLC curricula. The standard pattern is now for them to use Burmese language and base most of their teaching on the Burmese curriculum, but modified to get closer to the Thai pattern in the core subjects of mathematics, science and English, through the training and
materials provided by World Education. To this is added an understanding that the MLCs should be teaching Thai language using the PESA/World Education curriculum. But our research found that the actual use of the new curricula for the core subjects and Thai language was uneven. Most of the MLCs in our sample admitted to not implementing them fully. Usually this was attributed mainly to lack of teaching capacity. But for the oldest and best-established of the MLCs – the Children’s Development Centre attached to the Mae Tao Clinic – the reason was rather that it aspired – and could afford – to be more internationalist, using the Australian curriculum for English and a Singaporean one for the higher classes in science.

Although among MLCs there is now less use than before of Karen language and the KED curriculum, MLCs with considerable proportions of ethnic minority students (including Mon and Hmong as well as Karen), usually include classroom teaching about the history and geography of those groups, and encourage activities celebrating the cultures of those groups. The other MLCs teach a broader pluralist view of Burmese history and geography. Almost all of them have responded enthusiastically to the recent teacher training by NGOs, which helps them replace an authoritarian style of pedagogy with a more child-centred critical-thinking approach, and which introduces relevant new elements of public knowledge for Burma.

4. Conclusion

The new curriculum developments since 2007 are generally thought to have contributed to an improved standard of education being offered to students in the MLCs. But it is improvement from a low base, and represents a compromise between opposed interests rather than a solution, which meets the educational needs and rights of all the migrant children. The MLCs have gone a little way toward complying with the Thai Ministry of Education’s desire for alignment of their curricula with the Thai one, but they have not gone very far in that direction. Rather they have slightly consolidated their curricula around the Burmese one, while adjusting its contents in line with their visions of a future, more liberal Burma. This shift has been encouraged by the political opening-up, which has taken place in Burma since 2012. Indeed, MLC leaders have recently been at the forefront in campaigns for educational reform there, advocating greater investment, and more devolution of control over curriculum to the various ethnic states and to the schools and colleges themselves (Lawi Weng, 2012). The MLC leaders’ commitment to the Burmese system may well eventually contribute to improved schooling, and a more multicultural society in that country. But for the present, it still yields disappointing results for the migrant children who want to transfer to a state school system either in Burma or Thailand. Recently the Hsa Thoo Lei MLC sent more than a hundred of its students into Burma to take the national primary school matriculation examination. The result was disappointing: fewer than 25 per cent passed. The rate of successful transfers from MLC to Thai state schools has also remained low. The debates over the content of the MLC curricula seem to have distracted from – and been prolonged because of – the shortage of resources to teach any curriculum effectively.

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