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Thailand education policy for migrant children from Burma

Nongyao Nawarat *

The Centre of Multiculturalism and Education Policy, Faculty of Education, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand

Abstract

Thailand has publicly committed to free basic education for all children regardless of nationality since 2005, but this commitment is challenged by the presence in the economy of large numbers of migrant workers whose children do not easily fit into the state school system. This paper is based on the findings of a research report by the author investigating how Thai state policy and practice in this respect has interacted and negotiated with ‘migrant learning centers’ (institutions which according to the government do not qualify as schools) run by members of ethnic community based organizations from Burma.

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1. Introduction

Thailand is hosting about 1.3 million officially-registered migrant workers from the neighboring countries of Burma†, Cambodia and Lao PDR (Office of Foreign Workers Administration, 2011). They provide low-skilled labor in manufacturing, agriculture, fishery, construction and domestic service. About 80 per cent are from Burma, and a high proportion of these come from areas of Karen and Shan States where there are ethnic-based groups in armed opposition to the Burma military regime. Besides the registered workers, there are additionally more than 1.4 million family members and unregistered workers, according to a conservative estimate by the Thai Interior Ministry (Huguet et al., 2001, p.11). Within this group are child migrants and children who have been born in Thailand to migrant parents. It is not known how many there are of these but it is reasonable to suppose that the figure would be at least in the region of 170,000 and possibly much higher. (In a one-off registration of irregular migrants in 2004, 7.2 per cent were under the age of 15. An ILO report in 2009 put the number of child migrants and children of migrants under 18 at 377,000 (Jerrold et al., 2011, pp. 11–12).) The proportion of these children attending school is also hard to estimate. Work by Supang Chantavanich (2007) suggests that in 2004 it was in the order of 17 per cent. According to the government report to United Nation on May, 12 2011, around 60,000 are hosted by local state schools (Kritiya, 2011, p. 118).

Thailand, nevertheless, has been an active participant in the world agenda of Education for All. After Thailand’s 1992 ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, campaigning groups in the country including

* Associate Professor Dr Nongyao Nawarat. Tel.: +66-53-944216

E-mail address: nyayee@hotmail.com, nawarat@chiangmai.ac.th

† The name of Myanmar is contested by some opposition groups in that country. Many of the migrants referred to in this study sympathize with these groups and prefer the name ‘Burma’ and the description ‘Burmese’.

collectives of displaced persons and asylum seekers and local and international NGOs, vigorously pursued the agenda of child rights, and within that of education rights for stateless children. It hosted the World Conference on Education for All in 1990 (WCEFA, 1990), and senior officials participated in the 2000 World Education Forum which produced the Dakar Framework for Action (Fisk, 2000). The latter included a commitment to ‘ensuring that all children...have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality’ (WEF, 2000, Article 7(ii)). The 1999 Education Act had already laid down that ‘all individuals shall have equal rights and opportunities to receive 12 years free basic education provided by the State’ and that ‘[s]uch education, provided on a nationwide basis, shall be of quality and free of charge’ (Ministry of Education, 1999, Section 10). However, the Act did not explicitly state that ‘all individuals’ included temporary migrants and stateless children. This was only clarified in ministerial regulations approved by the cabinet on 5th July 2005, which declared that education opportunities must be extended to all children irrespective of whether they could produce evidence of Thai nationality or civil registration (OEC, 2008, pp. 11–14). The regulations also specified that each child should be enabled to obtain a graduation certificate (*ibid.*). Moreover, the movement restrictions normally placed on the families of migrant workers, could be waived for a child in order to find a suitable school (*ibid.*).

The absence of many migrant and stateless children from Thai state schools has partly been compensated for by the attendance of some at uncertified schools sometimes known as ‘learning centers’ or ‘child development centers’. In this paper they are referred to as ‘migrant learning centers’ (MLCs). These centers are normally run by members of the children’s ethnic community who tend to be intellectuals opposed to the Burmese military regime and sympathetic - if not affiliated - with armed opposition groups in Karen and Shan states. Some of the centers are very school-like, teaching a program of basic education from kindergarten to post tenth levels. Others are more like Sunday or night schools or social drop-in centers, where tuition in one or a few academic subjects is combined with community support activities. The latter typically include lessons in basic Thai language, social and cultural orientation, basic legal knowledge, health care and vocational training in skills like using computers. According to a leading figure in the MLC movement, an important part of MLC’s role is to offer a safe place to neglected and vulnerable children and also as a base for negotiation with the local Primary Educational Service Area (PESA) office to assure the right of education for migrant children (Interview, 22 September, 2011). Most of the more vigorous MLCs receive funding from international aid or charitable agencies. According to the government there are about 130 MLCs nationwide (Kritiya, 2011, p.188).

2. Research questions and methods

The research sought to discover how MLCs have responded to the changed governmental climate since 2005. The first round of fieldwork was undertaken between August and September 2011. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with leaders of 29 MLCs, mainly in the cities of Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, where there are special concentrations of the centers. We also observed the activities of the centers and attended meetings between their personnel and governmental authorities. We interviewed government officials and staff of aid agencies which support the MLCs.

3. Findings

3.1. Limited increase of migrant and stateless children in Thai state schools

The study found that the policy change in 2005 has resulted in a very substantial increase in the number of migrant and stateless children attending state schools. According to PESA Offices 1 and 3 in Chiang Mai Province, the numbers in their respective areas have reached 1,917 and 9,353 respectively (whereas in 2004 there were only 2,859 in the whole province). And whereas in 2004 there were 1,661 migrant and stateless children in state schools in Tak Province, in 2011 there were 10,000 persons in four districts alone. Interviews confirmed that the major

causes of the increase are: firstly, that state schools are officially mandated to accept these children and are given basic funding for doing so; secondly, that the direct costs to the children's families for schooling have been reduced (helped by increased state subsidies for school children in general, and grants from charitable organizations to assist stateless and migrant children with their travel and other costs); thirdly, that migrant and stateless children are now clearly eligible to receive certificates of graduation; and fourthly that the new regulations set up a system of permits by which migrant and stateless children are allowed to travel within Thailand for the sake of seeking a suitable school.

However, the proportion of migrant and stateless children in state schools is still thought to be only around 50 per cent in the studied areas (interviews with Deputy Director of PESA 2 Office in Tak, and Deputy Director of PESA 1 Office in Chiang Mai). There continue to be several obstacles for migrant and stateless children to access state schools. The most important one is financial. Schooling which nominally is free still has real costs which fall heavily on the poor. (On average migrant workers receive not above 70 per cent of the minimum wage rate set in Thailand.) For the many migrant workers who are not legally registered there is a serious risk in sending children to school that their illegal status may become apparent to the state authorities. Another difficulty is language. The place of Thai as the main medium of learning in state schools creates a serious obstacle for children who do not have it as their mother tongue. Recently, two state schools in Chiang Mai and three in Mae Sot received financial assistance from international NGOs to employ bilingual teachers. The Thai government itself has not made any progress in employing bilingual teachers in these areas. Some individual state schools have made provision to assist students who speak other languages, using monks or volunteers from the ethnic migrant communities, for most this measure is too difficult and expensive. Besides, from the states schools' standpoint, there are often administrative risks and complications involved in accepting migrant and stateless children. The children are relatively likely to be removed from the school in mid-year by their carers who, as migrant workers, are relatively rootless and have to move according to seasonal and other shifting patterns in the job market. The interviews suggested that it was practical factors such as these which sometimes cause schools to turn away stateless and migrant children, rather than ethnically discriminatory attitudes, as some researchers have reported (Premjai, 2011, p.4).

3.2. Increased vigor of migrant learning centres

The increase in the number of migrant and stateless children attending state schools is not simply a result of students transferring from the unofficial learning centers. Indeed, the numbers of MLCs and of students using them have generally increased since 2005. A major cause of this expansion is reduction in hostility from the Thai state. Some MLCs were set up during the 1990s and early 2000s, when large numbers of activists from groups opposed to the Burmese military regime fled to Thailand. But the MLCs at that time were often short-lived. They tended to be directly or indirectly suppressed because of Thai state concerns about aliens and national security. Their leaders and teachers from Burma were unable to obtain work permits for this kind of activity. They could be arrested and sent back to Burma, or made to take unskilled jobs instead. Where the centers survived, it usually depended on keeping a low profile. Under these circumstances it was hard to obtain funding from charitable organizations. At the same time, the MLCs could not get much finance from the students and their parents as they tended to be very low-paid workers.

After 2005 MLCs were able to come out more in the open and organize more strongly. In Mae Sot and some other border towns in Tak Province they increasingly became networked under the auspices of the Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (BMWEC). BMWEC created a channel of communication and influence in relation to the Thai authorities. At the same time it was able to attract charitable funding from abroad. By early 2011 BMWEC was partially supporting 46 MLCs in Mae Sot and the neighbouring sub-district of Phopa. Meetings between BMWEC, its affiliated centers, and representatives of the local Ministry of Education started taking place in 2006, and by 2009 they had become a regular monthly fixture. At first, Ministry of Education officials would occasionally intercede with the Thai security services when they had problems with the MLCs and their staff. More

recently, security service personnel have also been attending the meetings. This does not mean that MLCs have been fully legalized, but in Mae Sot town, at least, there has been little disruption of their work by state security forces in the last three years.

In Chiang Mai Province after 2005 two ethnic community based organizations were formed which have been active in creating small MLCs. One of them – SWAN (Shan Women’s Action Network) – supports five MLCs located in the border areas of Chiang Mai province. They provide a program of basic education comparable to the BMWEC member schools in Mae Sot. No centers like this exist inside Chiang Mai city. But the other new organization – Shan Youth – began to run MLCs at construction sites in Chiang Mai city and its suburbs. By the time of our interview, Shan youth were running ten evening schools and one Sunday school. The city has also seen an upgrowth in centers which provide evening or weekend learning spaces where stateless and migrant children who have joined state schools can gain additional support. Such support includes tutorial-style supplementary teaching – often using the students’ first language – to help them understand and keep up with their official classes.

3.3. Bridging the gap between learning centres and state schooling

The curricula of the learning centers in the studied areas are mostly modified from the Burmese school curriculum and from curricula used in areas controlled by opposition groups. After 2005 – more particularly since 2009 – there has been development of new curricula in some subjects, responding to Thai Ministry of Education concerns that if the MLCs are to be tolerated they must move closer to Thai standards, and produce students who are competent in Thai language. This kind of curriculum development, along with production of new teaching materials and training of teachers, has been supported by international aid agencies including USAID and UNICEF.

Other approaches to the problem of bridging the gap between MLCs and state school education include the recruitment by state schools of bilingual teachers (who in some cases previously worked in MLCs), and an initiative developed by the Ministry of Education's Secretariat of Basic Education and named ‘School Within School’. In this, migrant and stateless children at educational levels between Grade 1 and Grade 3 enroll in state schools, but only attend them once or twice per week, mainly in order to improve their Thai language. The remainder of the week they attend learning centers which have parallel programs of basic education. It is intended that after Grade 3 they should be able to attend the state school full time. However the scheme does not appear to have been very successful where it has been attempted.

From our interviews, Shan community based organizations based in Chiang Mai Province have recently been finding it hard to get funding for MLCs, so that they have decided to support children go to state schools, hoping that this support could improve the academic profiles of Shan children.

3.4. Conflicting agendas

Although the period since 2005 has seen increasing co-ordination between the MLCs and the state school system, this is constrained by conflicting agendas. The Thai government is apparently swayed by the international rights agenda on ‘education for all’ partly as a result of activism by home-grown civil society groups. It was hard for the government to ignore the rights of these children when migrant labour makes a large contribution to the Thai economy. Nevertheless, there is a conflict between migrant labour policy and education policy, since the first demands relatively short-term flexibility in controlling immigration, while the latter involved a longer-term commitment for each student.

The organizers of many of the MLCs, while also sympathetic to education rights, are largely concerned with preserving and developing Karen and Shan national identities. Ideally some of them would like the MLCs to produce educated cadres to help lead their societies in future. The latter commitment has become more problematic

recently, since the growth of hopes for a more open society in Burma. International agencies seem less keen than before to assisted border activism. In any case, many of the migrant and stateless students, and their families, are more interested in their relationship with the Thai state education system. The school certificate to which it leads is a valuable document for further educational progress, and can also be an important personal identity document for people who have been unable to obtain a passport or state identity card. Beyond this, many are pessimistic about their possible futures in Burma, and see the permissions of free movement and lengthy residence which now come with Thai state schooling as leading to longer-term employment and even eventual citizenship in Thailand.

4. Conclusions

The Thai government's regulations of 2005 have led to real progress toward the committed goal of 'education for all', but there is still a long way to go to the achievement of that goal. The MLCs are now playing an integral part in government's approach. However, as a result of mixed motives among governmental actors and the MLCs, the way forward is far from clear. In order to make state schools ready to provide education for stateless and migrant children, the government would have to provide higher per-capita funding for this group, and ensure that the schools used these extra funds for such measures as special teaching materials and training for teachers, and the employment of bilingual teachers and teaching assistants. The inspection and evaluation of the work of schools would need to give additional credit to schools working with minority populations. Until the state schools are able to accommodate virtually all of the stateless and migrant children, it would be necessary for the government to provide adequate legal status and material support to the MLCs, or some of them. The MLCs themselves are being forced to decide how far they are willing to compromise their aspirations to promote the distinctive ethnic heritage and identity of their students.

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