

The importance of access and accreditation: learning from the Thailand–Myanmar border

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The displaced community on the Thailand–Myanmar border has long provided for the basic educational needs of large numbers of children. Providing accredited education, however, remains a struggle.

The area around Mae Sot in western Thailand is home to a large population of refugees and other migrants who have fled conflict, political oppression or economic hardship in Myanmar (but do not live in the refugee camps). In the 1990s, teachers among the displaced population began creating informal schools called Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs). For years the MLCs were under constant threat of closure by the Thai government. Then, in 2006, a new Education for All policy instituted by the government changed the

dynamic between educators and government. Education for All was intended to open the doors to Thai educational institutions for all children regardless of their legal status or lack of documentation. However, turning policy into practice has proved challenging, and the reality is that most migrant children do not attend Thai schools.

Initiatives to provide accreditation

Over the years, constructive collaboration between the migrant education community

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and Thai government representatives has been built; the different actors involved also share a growing realisation of the need to provide children with accredited education, including transcripts that are transferrable to other education systems and that provide avenues to higher education. Since MLCs lack legal recognition as educational institutions and many teachers lack formal teaching credentials, accredited education is currently possible only through government systems (whether in Thailand or Myanmar) that few can access.

A number of initiatives are underway to remedy this situation. These include programmes to facilitate transfer of MLC students into Royal Thai Government schools or, alternatively, to formal education in Myanmar. With regard to the first option, all MLCs are now expected to teach the Thai language although implementing this is difficult given that schools are completely dependent on donors and receive no government funding. Students are also encouraged to enrol in a non-formal education programme called Kor Sor Nor (KSN), a three-year catch-up programme that was originally created for Thai students who had missed out on education but which is now open to migrant students to introduce them gradually to the Thai language and curriculum. Primary school-aged children take KSN classes in the MLCs, visit Thai KSN schools regularly and may eventually (if they complete the programme) make the transition to the formal Thai school system. Older students attend the KSN schools directly but need to develop their Thai language skills first.

In recent years, the Myanmar Ministry of Education has established a similar programme – the Non-Formal Primary Education programme (NFPE) – as part of its wider education reform. Migrant students are now able to take the Myanmar NFPE classes and exams at MLCs in Mae Sot. Students are also permitted to take Myanmar government school exams – for different school levels – at the MLCs. Both the Thai and Myanmar programmes offer a critical benefit: recognised records of achievement.

The migrant community has also taken independent initiatives to facilitate access to accredited education. For instance, MLCs and community-based organisations have collaborated to develop standardised exams for certain grades; these exams and the Myanmar government exams allow students to obtain certificates which allow transfer to Myanmar schools. In addition, in 2016 the community-based Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee, World Education Thailand and other education stakeholders created the Education Quality Framework (EQF) as an assessment tool to help ensure some standardisation and quality of instruction in the diverse MLC network, thereby also bringing schools more in line with Thai pedagogical standards. While the Thai MOE would like MLCs to be unified under one umbrella organisation and to use the education assessment tools issued by the Thai government, it has nonetheless been open to both the diversity that exists among MLCs and their use of the EQF.

Challenges

The Thai government approach demonstrates an understandable ambivalence toward the migrant education community. It withholds official school status from MLCs and does not allow MLC teachers the legal right to teach. However, the MOE has provided migrant teachers with identification cards and acted as an intermediary between them and immigration officials, protecting them from deportation. In addition, it works to inform parents about the option to send their children to Thai schools. Finally, even as MLCs increasingly use the Myanmar curriculum, the MOE has shown a willingness to engage with them and seems to have a positive view of the availability of Myanmar's NFPE and the potential for migrant students to enter Myanmar schools. MOE officials in Tak province have also mediated between the migrant education community and Thai immigration and security forces, and migrant children born in Thailand can now receive a 10-year identity card that ensures greater security for a longer period of time.



Sitting a Thai language test at BHSOH, a migrant learning centre which has an active KSN catch-up programme.

However, while the initiatives outlined above have created some new pathways for migrant youth to gain entry into one education system or the other, neither government provides funding support. The onus is on the MLCs to find the financial and human resources needed from benefactors and NGOs, an immense task in an environment in which finding funds simply to keep school doors open has become increasingly difficult.

A number of other challenges face the education community in Mae Sot. For cultural reasons or because their families often have to move for work, migrant children do not always integrate easily into formal education systems in host countries. The Thai government allows MLCs a degree of freedom to operate but little access to formal accreditation processes. The success of new initiatives is often hampered by bureaucratic, logistical and financial hurdles in a country where rules change often. If migrant parents are undocumented, they are often apprehensive about enrolling their children in Thai schools. Unemployment puts economic strain on the family unit, and many youth drop out of school to work illegally. Lastly, educators, parents and children from Myanmar do not all share the same goals, and there is therefore no

'one-size-fits-all' solution when it comes to creating pathways to accredited education.

A shift in thinking and practice?

In spite of the obstacles, the experiences of the Mae Sot migrant education community show that opportunities exist for expanding access to accredited education. When governments work collaboratively with migrant education communities, both security and educational choices can be enhanced. Education for All created a huge shift in thinking and practice among Thai government officials. Although unable to provide accreditation, MLCs in Mae Sot have been allowed to provide basic education – as well as security and support for children – and a few go further, for example by preparing youth for Myanmar government exams or the internationally recognised General Education Diploma (GED) exam which allows, potentially at least, entry into universities. Through acceptance of the realities of the situation and through flexibility and collaboration between educators, NGOs and government, much has been accomplished.

More could be done, however. The Thai government could go further to create bridges between the migrant education community and the formal education system building on the positive achievements of the informal

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MLC system such as the EQF. In Southeast Asia, migration and forced displacement have regional implications and consequences; if the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were to create an ASEAN-wide education framework to support legal status for MLCs, the transfer of academic records and certification of teacher expertise, this would serve the interests of those building the regional economy as well as those who are migrating or forcibly displaced. Civil society actors, in this case educators, could play a critical role in developing the standards and mechanisms for accomplishing these goals, including development of an ASEAN GED programme to replace the one currently used (which is the GED programme developed by the United States).

Finally, and critically, governments must provide funding if policies such as Education for All or cross-border initiatives are to be

effectively implemented – to avoid vital functions remaining financially dependent on international organisations. There has recently been a sharp downturn in funding for the Migrant Learning Centres on the border as NGOs and donor governments have cut funding, possibly due to the prioritisation of perceived greater needs inside Myanmar and elsewhere. The migrant education community in Mae Sot has felt deserted. Education for refugees and other migrants demands not only acknowledgment but also investment.

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