

Migrant Learning Center Emergence and Proliferation: A Case Study of Migrant Education in Ranong Province

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Received 2023-04-11; Revised 2023-07-02; Accepted 2023-07-22;

Published online: 2023-xx-xx

Abstract

This research aims to 1) identify the critical factors leading to the establishment of Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) in Ranong Province, Thailand; 2) explore the critical factors leading to the proliferation of Migrant Learning Centers in Ranong Province, Thailand; and 3) analyze factors that hamper the realization of “Education for All” and SDG Goal 4’s assurance of inclusive and equitable quality education via Migrant Learning Centers in Ranong Province. The research process implemented a collective case study design employing qualitative-descriptive methods, with social science approaches, based on semi-structured in-depth interviews and a literature review. Fifty respondents were interviewed through mixed sampling methods including 10 MLC teachers and 40 former MLC students. Corresponding to the research aims, findings show that, firstly, MLCs in Ranong Province began to modestly emerge in the 1990s in tandem with the growing presence of Myanmar migrants to the area. With limited access to Thai public schools for migrant children because of discrimination, cost, and parental preference for Myanmar-rooted education, Myanmar parents and their children responded favorably to community-based schooling options in the form of Migrant Learning Centers. Secondly, the proliferation of these schools within the province did not begin until the mid-2000s due to several converging factors. These included the 2004 tsunami which brought NGOs and other international funders into affected regions, the 2005 Cabinet Resolution which brought more clarity and legitimacy to the rights of undocumented children in accessing education, recognition and action by NGOs and other international actors to invest in mitigating the vast presence of out-of-school children within Thailand, as well as quasi-acceptance of MLCs by local authorities. Finally, MLC education is still hampered in supporting the Thai State to achieve “Education for All” and SDG Goal 4’s assurance of inclusive and equitable quality education due to: 1) tenuous commitment by the Thai State in supporting MLCs; 2) the need for continued coordination between various education stakeholders towards building accreditation systems that allow for MLC students to seamlessly transfer their studies among educational institutes.; 3) and vulnerability of MLC operations due to donor dependency.

Keywords :*Foreign Language Learning, Anxiety, Communication Apprehension, Fear of Negative Evaluation, Test anxiety*

Introduction

Migrant workers to Thailand have become critical to bolstering the Thai economy. Since the 1980s, Thailand's expanding economy has created demand for unskilled labor as Thais' education improved moving them from semi-skilled to skilled jobs in conjunction with a national birth rate decline, which has created domestic labor shortages (Truong et al., 2014). As a result of such economic pull factors, Thailand has an abundant migrant workforce, and as of August 2022, there were 2,167,937 officially registered migrant workers in Thailand; of these, 1,556,408 people (approximately 72%) were from Myanmar (ILO, 2022: 2).

Additionally, with decades of ongoing war and displacement, tides of Myanmar migrants continue to seek asylum and increased job opportunities in Thailand, often bringing their children with them (Soe et al., 2023). Multifaceted layers of vulnerability face these children and their families, such as negative attitudes towards migrants, lack of knowledge about Thai policy and law, undocumented entry, and general fear of accessing government services (IOM, 2019), all of which create barriers to education for Myanmar migrant children.

While the Thai government mandates nine years of compulsory "Education for All" at the primary and lower secondary levels, and which is free in public education institutions (Vibulpatanavong, 2017), implementation for non-Thais is weak, and migrant children are largely unable to gain access to public education (Petchot, 2014); this has resulted in more than 200,000 out-of-school migrant children residing in Thailand who receive no form of education although this number is likely underestimated due to difficulty collecting data (IOM, 2019: 102).

In response to the educational gap experienced by migrant children within Thailand, Migrant Learning Centers have emerged across the country to address the unmet educational needs of Myanmar children and youth. Most MLCs are independently operated providing education at various levels and often adopt a modified Myanmar national curriculum (Sandar et al., 2022; Nawarat, 2012). As of 2021, the number of Migrant Learning Centers in Thailand was recorded at 91 nationally (Vungsiriphisal et al., 2022).

With a population of 194,573 people in Ranong Province as of 2021 (NSO, 2021: n.p.), the Mueang Ranong District historically represents the highest population density within the province (OOIC, 2022). In a 2022 news article posted by the Thailand's Ministry of Labor, Labor Minister Mr. Suchart Chomklin stated that within Ranong Province there were 34,111 licensed migrant workers working in the area (MOL, 2022: n.p.). While the true number of Myanmar migrants in Ranong Province is unknown due to informal border crossing, Ranong Province is cited as having one of the highest proportions of Myanmar migrant workers in relation to the registered Thai population compared to other provinces (Tuangratananon et al., 2019a) and has three MLCs currently in operation.

The subsequent research objectives and findings further explore the context of MLCs in Ranong Province specifically as relates to their emergence, proliferation, and challenges hampering their provision of education.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the critical factors leading to the establishment of Migrant Learning Centers in Ranong Province.
2. To explore the critical factors leading to the proliferation of Migrant Learning Centers in Ranong Province.
3. To understand factors that hamper the realization of “Education for All” and SDG Goal 4’s assurance of inclusive and equitable quality education via Migrant Learning Centers in Ranong Province.

Research Questions

1. What critical factors led to the establishment of Migrant Learning Centers in Ranong Province?
2. What critical factors led to the proliferation of Migrant Learning Centers in Ranong Province?
3. What factors hamper Migrant Learning Center’s ability to create inclusive, quality education opportunities for Myanmar migrant children in Ranong Province?

Literature Review

Nationwide Emergence of Migrant Learning Centers in Thailand

For decades, Myanmar migrants have come to Thailand because of better economic opportunity, political instability, conflict, and systemic discrimination and environmental exploitation, especially within ethnic minority regions (Sandar et al., 2022). Entering to Thailand, their legal status is often tenuous with few qualifying for refugee status or documented employment and with most becoming undocumented migrants (Ibid.). The common trend among Myanmar migrants is enter the country with dependents or have children while residing in Thailand (Rattanapan et al., 2017) creating an increasing need for migrant educational services.

Additionally, prior 2005, non-Thai children struggled to access government education with enrollment for stateless children and refugee children confined to designated areas within the country (Arphattananon, 2022). In response to limited education options for migrants, the 1990s saw the emergence of Migrant Learning Centers across the border areas of Thailand and was spearheaded by local leaders largely within the Myanmar migrant community (Nawarat, 2014). Since their inception, MLCs have provided education ranging from Early Childhood Care and Development to the upper secondary level, depending on the MLC and have generally adopted a modified Myanmar curriculum with

the incorporation of additional classes, such as Thai language (Sandar et al., 2022; Nawarat, 2012).

Proliferation of Migrant Learning Centers Across Thailand

In 2005, critical policy shifts set the stage for MLC proliferation. In this year, Thailand made its biggest actionable steps in support of migrant education via the Rule of the Ministry of Education on Evidentiary Document for Pupils and Students Admission into Establishment of Education B.E. 2548 (Vungsiriphisal et al., 2022). It is here that Thai education became formally open to migrant children without any documentation and allowed migrant students enrolled in school to have an identity card (Tuangratananon et al., 2019b). Often referred to as a “G-card”, this identity card is only recognized by the education sector and allows Thai Public Schools to receive funding per student (Ibid.) incentivizing schools to enroll migrant children, particularly for schools with low enrollment rates.

While this Rule and Thailand’s commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals do not specifically mandate cooperation with Migrant Learning Centers, 2005 and onward have marked an increased collaboration between the Thai State and MLCs (Nawarat, 2014). For example, local authorities under the Ministry of Education in Mae Sot began formally communicating with MLCs and began to put pressure on MLCs to modify their curriculums to align with the Thai national curriculum more closely (Ibid.). For many MLCs, this led to a shift in their pedagogy towards a Thai influenced curriculum and more MLC students attending Thai schools (Ibid.). While these policies do not make MLCs legalized, they increased the Thai government’s tolerance and collaboration; concurrently, the number of MLCs and students attending them also increased (Ibid.).

Migrant Learning Centers established their presence with humble commitment and roots but took on new scale and appearance through international partnerships. Economic investment by the international donor community has been a major impetus for MLCs to grow in physical size and catchment expansion. Of the 110 Migrant Learning Centers that were recorded as operating within Thailand in 2018 - 2019, the vast majority were reliant to some degree on international funding for their activities (Tyrosvoutis, 2019: 12).

MLC Challenges and Responses Realizing “Education for All” and SDG Goal 4

In reviewing the nationwide landscape, Migrant Learning Centers have provided critical educational services over the past three decades, yet several challenges still impede their ability to operate to their full potential. Some of these challenges include volatile relations with the Thai State, accreditation obstacles which can create difficulty in continuing education, and insufficient and inconsistent funding (Nawarat, 2012; Miyajima, 2018; Tyrosvoutis, 2019). Yet, despite the barriers they face, MLCs continue to innovate and navigate change towards more fully realizing inclusive, comprehensive, and improved

quality education services as enshrined in the auspices of Thailand's "Education for All" and SDG Goal 4.

Historically, MLCs have received scrutiny by the Thai authorities resulting in direct or indirect shutdowns due to a perceived threat to national security (Nawarat, 2012). The volatility of relations weighs on their ability to provide consistent education. Despite these setbacks, over the years MLCs have formed networks throughout the country for increased influence and connectivity with the Thai State. One example is the Migrant Education Integration Initiative (MEII) which is comprised of MLCs across Thailand and creates communication outlets between MLCs, community-based organizations, and the Thai government which have helped to improve MLC and government relations while spearheading migrant education reform (BEAM, 2023b).

Additionally, accreditation of MLC education has been a lingering obstacle to continued studies of its students. Most Migrant Learning Centers do not operate legally due to demanding state regulations (Nawarat, 2019); concurrently, the education from Migrant Learning Centers themselves are not recognized as accredited education (Miyajima, 2018). In response, many MLCs are now adopting parallel learning paths within their Centers to provide students a host of options for continued study based on their circumstance and preference. A few of these options include online programs such as the General Education Development (GED) which upon passing provides high school equivalency that is recognized internationally for transition into tertiary education, MLCs implementing or coordinating with Thailand's Non-formal Education (NFE) departments which provide accredited education within Thailand, and various vocational training opportunities which aim to provide skills without necessity of accreditation or educational maturation to put into immediate use (Sandar et al., 2022; Lwin et al., 2021).

Furthermore, international funding has become critical to the operation of many Migrant Learning Centers but has also increased MLCs vulnerability due to their donor dependency (Tyrosvoutis, 2019). With their scope and scale increasing, the resources needed to operate many of these Centers now exceeds parents' tuition capability and, without Thai government subsidies, external funding agencies are used to fill the financial gap (Ibid.). When funding is cut or reduced for MLCs, they struggle to maintain their operations as experienced in Mae Sot between 2013-14 when 25 MLCs faced closure because of funding cuts (DVB, 2013: n.p.). MLC closures result in increased drop-out rates and further marginalize migrant children who are already at-risk of poverty and exploitation (Tyrosvoutis, 2019). Means to build MLC funding resilience are still a dilemma without clear future resolve.

Research Methodology

Study Design and Study Site

The research process implemented a collective case study design employing qualitative-descriptive methods, with social science approaches, based on semi-structured in-depth interviews and a literature review. The social science theory used for this research

views “social life as organized by structural entities (e.g., social institutions, cultural symbol systems, structures of race, class, and gender, etc.) that stand outside of the flow of events in everyday life (Clayman, 2015: 204). In the case of this research, the structural entity of focus was Migrant Learning Centers including the factors contributing to their emergence and proliferation, as well as the barriers and opportunities influencing their education (i.e., migrant education) in fulfilling “Education for All” and SDG Goal 4.

Mueang Ranong District was selected as the study site as it is currently the only district in which MLCs are operated within the province and has established MLCs which have been providing education for Myanmar migrant students for over 20 years. It is located in southern Thailand and borders Myanmar to its west (Ranong Community Development Office, 2017: n.p.) with a high density of Myanmar migrants (Tuangratananon et al., 2019a).

Study Participants

As this study focuses on migrant education in MLCs within Ranong Province, all respondents were Migrant Learning Center teachers or former students who were teaching or who had studied at MLCs in Muang Ranong District. To date, there are three MLCs operating within Muang Ranong District and 10 MLC teachers were purposively sampled from one of the three remaining MLCs according to feasibility of time and data comparability. An additional 40 respondents who were former students of MLCs were sampled through convenience sampling for in-person interviews and snowball sampling for online interviews.

The study population sample was interviewed between August 2022 – January 2023 and included a total of 50 respondents as represented in the chart below:

Table 1
Research Participants by Interview and Respondent Type

Interview Type	Respondent Type	No. of Males	No. of Females	Total No. of Respondents
In-person in-depth interview	Former MLC students	7	11	18
Online in-depth interview	Former MLC students	13	9	22
Total No. of Former Students:		20	20	40
In-person in-depth interview	Current MLC teachers	2	5	7
Online in-depth interview	Current MLC teachers	1	2	3
Total No. of Teachers Interviewed:		3	7	10
Total No. of Respondents Interviewed:		23	27	50

Note: All research respondents were 18 years of age or older; an Institutional Review Board was undertaken and approved prior to the start of data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research used in-person and online in-depth interviews to collect data, as well as a literature review of issues pertinent to the study such as provincial data, migration trends, policy review, and studies on migrant education within Thailand. Additionally, experts in the field of development and migrant education were also consulted to triangulate the validity of data. Twenty-five interviews were conducted in-person in at respondents' homes, public spaces, schools, and places of work. An additional twenty-five interviews were conducted remotely via Facebook Messenger, Viber, and Line with all interviews approximately 45 minutes to one hour in length. All interviews were recorded with the permission of respondents and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The Researcher served as the main interviewer with respondents interviewed in Myanmar, Thai, and English based on their language preference. Translators assisted in interviews where respondents preferred to speak in Myanmar language.

The Researcher used thematic analysis applied to verbatim interview transcriptions in which deductive coding was used with a predefined set of codes based on the topic of analysis. Codes as pertain to the findings presented here included "emergence", "proliferation", "barriers to education", and "educational opportunity." Analysis used a semantic approach drawing from explicit content from interview responses and was organized and synthesized using the qualitative research software program HyperRESEARCH.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to research protocol and obtained ethics approval of research involving human subjects by the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects: The Second Allied Academic Group in Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University. Verbal consent was obtained from all respondents, as opposed to written consent, because of respondents' tenuous legal status within the country. Selected respondents were free to refuse to be interviewed, withdraw during the interview, or refrain from answering any questions they felt uncomfortable responding to. Confidentiality of interviews was ensured through a coding process to guarantee the safety, security, and anonymity of participants.

Research Results

1. Critical Factors Leading to the Establishment of MLCs in Ranong Province, Thailand

Migrant Learning Centers in Ranong Province began to modestly emerge in the 1990s at which time the growing presence of Myanmar migrants began to rival the Thai population. As seen with national trends, those who migrated to Ranong Province brought along dependents or began having children while residing in Thailand resulting in the subsequent increase of Myanmar minors in the area. With limited access to Thai public

schools, because of discrimination, cost, and parental preference for Myanmar-rooted education, Myanmar migrant families and their children were refused or dissuaded from joining the Thai educational system and quickly and eagerly responded to community-based Myanmar schooling options (UNICEF, 2019). These humble schools, which began from community members homes, eventually transformed into a more robust network of Migrant Learning Centers attended by thousands within the province. The following section briefly captures the factors leading to the emergence of MLCs in Ranong Province as largely described through first-hand accounts from MLC teachers and former students.

1.1 Geographical Proximity

Ranong Province's geographic proximity to Thailand has made it a popular work destination point for many people seeking better employment opportunities within Thailand. Today, Ranong has one of the highest numbers of recorded migrants to total population compared to other provinces in Thailand, with Mueang Ranong District and Kraburi District being the most non-Thai-populated Districts within the Province (Tuangratananon et al., 2019a). Most of the migrant workers within Mueang Ranong District have come seeking employment in the fishery industries, construction, and the service industry, whereas Kraburi District hosts larger numbers of migrant working in agriculture due to its rural setting (Srisai et al., 2020). Migrant population density within Ranong Province is not a new occurrence. In 1992, Thailand's 'registration policy' was first amended (Chalamwong, 2011) with Ranong being one of the pilot provinces for its early iterations (Chantavanich, 2003).

1.2 Reasons for Migration

Out of 10 Migrant Learning Center teachers who were interviewed five had migrated to Ranong Province in the 1990s or were born to parents who migrated to Thailand in the 90s. In-depth interviews conducted with Migrant Learning Center teachers recount the following,

"I passed Myanmar's national matriculation exam in 1983, but the 1988 conflict in Myanmar disrupted my studies because schools were shut down which made my education very long and difficult. By 1993, I came to Thailand when I was still a third-year economics student at university. At that time, the economic situation in Myanmar was very poor and there weren't job opportunities. I had originally intended to migrate to Bangkok, but it was too challenging. So, instead, I went to Ranong by boat. I started doing carpentry work there, and a year later I was able to bring my family over."

*Male, Burmese Ethnicity, Former MLC Founder
(Personal Interview, 25 September 2022)*

"My mother came to work in Ranong in the 1990s. She took on odd jobs, but mostly did daily labor in the fishery business. At that time, the economy in Myanmar wasn't good, and she had three children who were studying, so my family needed the income. My father followed, and he found work as a carpenter around the shipyards. When I was 16, I came to join my parents and worked in a seafood factory."

*Female, Dawei Ethnicity, MLC Teacher and Co-Founder
(Personal Interview, 20 August 2022)*

In interviews above, Myanmar's failing economy and opportunity for employment in Thailand was cited as a critical factor for key informants to migrate. During the 1990s, Myanmar's economic growth was modest compared to regional countries and that poverty pervaded the country resulting in high rates of malnourished children, below average health, and low levels of educational attainment (IMF, 1999). Nawarat's 2019 study further supports these first-hand accounts stating that Thailand's expanding labor market has required migrants for its economy's competitiveness and that the desperate circumstances in Myanmar made people willing to accept work conditions below domestic legal standards (Nawarat, 2019).

In two interviews, political instability within the country as the result of the 1988 conflict was noted as an explicit contributing factor. As one key informant recalled,

"My parents migrated here after 1988 due to the security situation within the country. I came to visit my parents and ended up staying."

*Female, Burmese Ethnicity, MLC Teacher
(Personal Interview, 9 October 2022)*

This is similarly echoed by Chantavanich and Vungsiriphisal who in 2012 published that the numbers of Myanmar migrants flowing into Thailand increased rapidly following the political unrest of 1988 (Chantavanich & Vungsiriphisal, 2012).

1.3 Changing Policy

Of the MLC teachers interviewed, they were not explicitly aware of any policy changes within country but noted that this was a "popular" time for Myanmar people to go to work in Thailand. Inferences can be made that Thailand's changing policy on accepting unskilled migrants into the workforce may have contributed to word-of-mouth invitations and recommendations to migrate to Thailand for employment. In Chalamwong's research, it is further remarked that between 1990 – 2000, the "registration policy" amended in 1992 was the most important policy of that period and acknowledged the presence of migrant workers, as well as began their quasi-regularization within country (Chalamwong, 2011).

Additionally, up until 1989 the fishery workforce was mostly occupied by internal migrants from the Northeast region of Thailand, but with broadening work opportunities for Thais in the 1990s, the devastation of Typhoon Gay which killed at least 540 fisherman, and impact of AIDS in the Northeast, the marine fishery industry soon saw a shift in reliance to foreign labor (Caouette et al., 2006: 41). As Caouette et al. cite in their research, "A first recognition of the dramatic shift from internal to intra-regional migrant labor came in 1997 when the registration allowed a ratio of one Thai to nine foreign migrant workers in marine fisheries" (Ibid.: 41).

1.4 Migrating with Dependents

Every teacher interviewed either migrated to Thailand with their family, brought their family after initially finding work in Thailand, or got married and had children within Thailand. This was similarly true for the 40 former MLC students interviewed; no one lived exclusively alone in Thailand, although some later experienced parents or relatives migrating back to Myanmar or within Thailand. Similar migration dynamics have been observed in Phangnga Province where most Myanmar migrants live in families and

children either follow their parents to Thailand or migrant workers bare children while in Thailand (Rattanapan et al., 2017).

1.5 Discrimination in Ranong Province

The presence of so many Myanmar children within Ranong Province has necessitated alternative options for study and is also linked to discrimination. As former MLC students stated,

“Living in Thailand, you don't have the same opportunities as Thai people because we are Myanmar. It's fine to live here, but your options are limited.”

*Male, Age 19, Burmese Ethnicity, Former MLC Student, Fish Monger
(Personal Interview, 21 August 2022)*

“There is a lot of discrimination towards Myanmar people in Thailand. Some people think that Myanmar people are dirty or stupid because they may not be able to read or write in Thai.”

*Male, Age 25, Myeik Ethnicity, Former MLC Student, MLC Teacher
(Personal Interview, 21 August 2022)*

These testimonials highlight a consistent report of bias that persists in Thai society, and which impact enrollment of Myanmar children in Thai schools in Ranong Province. The attitudes surrounding Myanmar children in Thai schools can make the enrollment and integration process formidable. While in some ways Myanmar people are more acknowledged in Ranong Province than in some other areas of Thailand, for example, as seen through prolific bi-lingual signage in Thai and Burmese geared at the Myanmar consumer market, there still pervades an underlying tension among “locals” and the significant Myanmar population presence, which is sometimes expressed within the school setting. In the 2019 Tuangratananon et. al. study, which was conducted in Ranong Province, the researchers found that many Thai parents had poor attitudes towards Myanmar students and felt that the presence of Myanmar children within Thai schools denoted poorer quality of education (Tuangratananon et. al., 2019b).

1.6 Difficulty Enrolling in Thai Public Schools in Ranong Province

Difficulties in enrolling Myanmar children in Thai schools also contribute to the need for MLCs in Ranong Province to bridge the educational chasm of children in the area. As one former student and current MLC teacher reflected,

“In the past, it was very difficult for migrants to get into Thai schools, and if we didn't have Migrant Learning Centers...How are we going to study? How are we going to have education?”

Even though you can get into Thai school with documents, you still face many difficulties there. You will face discrimination between Thai and Burmese...the difficulties in language between Thai and Burmese...and also the level of the study because some students are quite old, but they have to join Grade 1 in Thai schools [either because they do not speak Thai or have never been to school]... that is not fair for them.

Migrant Learning Centers have different levels for the different students, and you don't face as much discrimination as in Thai schools. In the past, there were 13 MLCs, so you had a choice...whichever you wanted, you could go and study."

*Female, Age 23, Dawei Ethnicity, Former MLC Student, MLC Teacher
(Personal Interview, 16 August 2022)*

As the former MLC student cited, documentation was a consideration for migrant children enrolling in Thai public schools. In policy, the nationality and legal status of a child's parents is not formal criteria for allowing a child to enter Thai public schools, but Thai teachers in Ranong Province often asked for documents like work permits or passports in the registration process; this made many parents who were not properly documented within Thailand hesitant to send their children to Thai Public Schools (Tuangratananon et. al., 2019b).

Additionally, other requirements for enrolling non-Thais in public school are not always in keeping with stated government policy. In Ranong Province, one example of this is the unwritten but widely accepted and practiced requirement of Myanmar children needing to have basic Thai literacy to join Thai schools (Ibid.). This creates barriers for older children to enroll in Thai schools and can lead to children and youth being enrolled in grade levels not matching their age. This creates major challenges; for example, older migrant students often feel embarrassed to be studying with children significantly younger than themselves, which can contribute to increased drop-out rates. Additionally, teachers often struggle to cope with classroom management and contextually appropriate teaching techniques; teaching and managing children of drastically different ages with limited human resources can make it difficult to gear their lessons and classroom managements styles to suitably address the age, academic competencies, and cultural range of students within the class.

1.7 Economic Barriers for Myanmar Children Attending Thai Public Schools in Ranong Province

Another former MLC student and brief attendee at a Thai Public School in Ranong Province shared her difficulties integrating with Thai students due to economic disparities. She recounts,

"I am now 20 years old, and I was born in Ranong, Thailand. I live in Thailand where I was born, and I have never been to Myanmar.

The first school that I attended in Thailand was a Thai school. I was there just for seven days because I felt that in the Thai school, they didn't have Myanmar children. I thought there were so many Thai children in the school, and the Thai children are rich. I am poor, so I felt that I couldn't be with them. I cried and I left the school."

*Female, Age 20, Dawei Ethnicity, Former MLC Student, Noodle Vendor
(Personal Interview, 4 December 2022)*

Similarly on a national level, UNICEF reported economic factors as being a barrier for entering Thai Public Schools; while the Thai government supports the cost of school fees and subsidies for school supplies and uniforms, it does not cover the full cost of uniforms, transportation, and lunch at the secondary level (UNICEF, 2019). Within Ranong Province, Tuangratananon, et. al. found that while Thai Public School education

was free, for some parents the transportation cost was unaffordable (Tuangratananon et al., 2019b). In contrast, most MLCs in Ranong were located near Myanmar communities, which helped to lower transportation fees for parents making them more economically viable (Ibid.).

1.8 Community Interventions in Migrant Education within Ranong Province

As reported in interviews with four MLC committee members within the province, their initial formation of MLCs in Muang Ranong District resulted from community identified needs and interventions. To address the growing number of out-of-school migrant children and child laborers, some Myanmar migrants began establishing informal study centers out of their homes; these study centers eventually transitioned to rented buildings as student numbers and monetary support increased. Parents would sometimes pay a small fee for services, at the discretion of the school, but in some cases teaching services were provided freely.

The instructors at these study centers did not necessarily have former teaching experience, but the majority had graduated from high school or had attended university in their home country. The earlier MLC founders and teachers did not come to Thailand explicitly to teach migrant children, rather the majority arrived for higher paying work opportunities and eventually transitioned from part-time to full-time teaching.

The following excerpt is from a Migrant Learning Center teacher and co-founder in Ranong Province and describes the establishment of their school:

“The foundation of our learning center wasn’t intentional. My parents ran their own business in Myanmar and loved their country, but a poor economy forced them to immigrate to Thailand for higher pay. My mother was the first to come here, planning to pick-up work in the factories or earn daily labor wages wherever employment was to be found. My father joined after and began doing carpentry work. While willing to take on unskilled labor, my father was an educated man, and knowledge of his education spread throughout the community by word-of-mouth. Before long, several Myanmar parents come to us to tutor their children. It is here that our Learning Center began. We began with just a few children, but at our peak, we were teaching around 250 children.”

*Female, Dawei Ethnicity, MLC Teacher and Co-Founder
(Personal Interview, 20 August 2022)*

At the time of the above-mentioned Learning Center’s founding in 1997, NGOs and local social service providers were not yet engaged in organizing and formalizing a system for migrant children to attend school. The founder of this school saw children on the streets or working without prospects of a better future and felt that they should be in classrooms. This led to their grassroots engagement and the development of one of the first MLCs in Ranong Province.

1.9 Culture and Language

In addition to the lack of monetary provision and targeted enrollment support for migrant children by NGOs and the government in the 1990s, Myanmar parents within Ranong Province have traditionally expressed an interest in their child to receive a Myanmar-centric education. Of the 40 former students interviewed in this research project,

the majority were of Burman ethnicity or were a Burman sub-ethnic group and described connection to their familial heritage, including language. For many of these former students, their parents emphasized the importance of learning Burmese. As one participant shared,

“My mother was so proud that I was able to go to a Migrant Learning Center and that I was able to graduate. It meant a lot to her for me to be able to learn in Burmese language. Before I went to the Migrant Learning Center, both my parents helped to teach me to read and write in Burmese.”

Male, Age 22, Burmese Ethnicity, Former MLC Student, Delivery Service Employee

(Personal Interview, 5 November 2022)

In the research by Tuangratananon et al. in Ranong Province, they also found that a preference for Myanmar culture contributed to parents choosing MLCs over Thai public schools (Tuangratananon et al., 2019b). Of the 3,200 enrolled within MLCs and Thai public schools in 2019, approximately 72% chose MLCs over Thai public education despite having to pay tuition fees at MLCs (Ibid.: 7).

In addition to MLC education, many of the former students interviewed spent one or more years studying in Myanmar due to parents’ decision to bolster and formalize their education through the Myanmar government system.

1.10 Future Living Plans

Another reason that MLCs became necessitated is linked to the desire for many migrants in Ranong Province to one day return home. Of the 40 former students interviewed, more than 80% expressed a desire to one day live in Myanmar. One former student explained,

“I was born in Ranong, but I am a Myanmar person, so I want to return to Myanmar one day.”

Male, Age 19, Burmese Ethnicity, Former MLC Student, Fish Monger
(Personal Interview, 21 August 2022)

Myanmar parents, who aim to return to their homeland in the future or wish to have their children work in Myanmar after being brought up, tended to choose MLCs for their children. This was also consistent with previous findings in Ranong Province, as well as a study conducted in Tak Province, which has the highest concentration of MLCs, and cited that Thai schools are usually perceived as less desirable by parents because they do not provide a complementary educational pathway meaning that they cannot transition back into their equivalent grade level in Myanmar should they return (Tyrosvoutis et al., 2021).

The emergence of Migrant Learning Centers within Ranong Province follows several national trends. These include large numbers of Myanmar people migrating to the province followed by their families or families grown in Thailand, limited options for schooling, and the community’s committed efforts to provide more accessible and context-appropriate schools for Myanmar children, particularly in terms of Burmese literacy and linkages to continued schooling in Myanmar.

2. Critical Factors Leading to the Proliferation of MLCs in Ranong Province

Despite the significant presence of migrant workers and their children in Ranong Province since the 1990s, the proliferation of these schools did not begin until the mid-2000s. Several converging factors supported their growth including the 2004 tsunami which brought NGOs and other international funders into affected regions of the south of Thailand, the 2005 Cabinet Resolution which brought more clarity and legitimacy to the rights of undocumented children to access education, recognition and action by NGOs and other international actors to invest in mitigating the vast presence of out-of-school children, as well as quasi-acceptance and toleration of the operations of MLCs by local authorities. During this time, the number of MLCs increased from just a few modestly operated schools to, at its peak, 13 operational Centers in Ranong.

2.1 2004 Tsunami

On December 26, 2004, a quake-triggered tsunami devastated shorelines of the Andaman coast in southern Thailand (Thanawood et al., 2006: 207). Six coastal provinces, including Ranong Province, were affected and it triggered Thailand's largest relief operation to date (Falk, 2013: 27). After the disaster, Ranong Province received critical and extensive external support from both the central government and private sectors to help them recover (Pananont et al., 2015). Among those affected included Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, with the UNDP estimating that country-wide there were 1,000 to 7,000 Myanmar migrant worker victims (Rigg et al., 2008: 144). While initial efforts focused on the immediate disaster relief needs, it also spurred national and international awareness of migrant children's needs within the area, including their limited access to education. For example, in Save the Children's 4-year post tsunami report, they cite that their efforts included the establishment of Migrant Learning Centers for Myanmar migrant children which lead to the provision of basic education for 215 children (Save the Children, 2008: 10).

Similarly, a teacher from Ranong Province's first MLC comments on the proliferation of Learning Centers in the area stating,

“There were a lot of Migrant Learning Centers that opened around 2006 because of the tsunami. After the tsunami, donors started to come into the area, and they also supported education for disadvantaged children. So, there were a lot of Centers that opened at that time.”

*Female, Dawei Ethnicity, MLC Teacher and Co-Founder
(Personal Interview, 20 August 2022)*

This trend was also observed in research conducted in the neighboring province of Phangnga, which was the most heavily affected province by the tsunami. In Fraser's report, they recount, “In the aftermath of the tsunami, many NGOs came to the area to help provide for the communities affected. At that time, small, informal schools were set up to provide basic education for children, Thai or Burmese, who were unable to attend school” (Fraser, 2014: 32). The range of actors engaged in Phangnga Province's migrant education initiatives included the local Thai government, Thai NGOs, international NGOs, as well as representatives from the Myanmar community (Ibid.) as also mirrored in the case of Ranong Province.

The devastation of the 2004 tsunami set in motion an unanticipated shift in the educational avenues for migrants within the area. With its destruction also came new opportunities for learning and an abundance of MLCs from which Myanmar children could choose, but while the tsunami was the impetus for external stakeholders to enter the area, several other factors came into play to support the proliferation of MLCs as detailed in the sections below.

2.2 2005 Cabinet Resolution and NGO Engagement in the Right to Education

The 2005 Cabinet Resolution on Education for Unregistered Persons brought significant progress to increase access to education for undocumented and migrant children within Thailand allowing them to enroll in state schools regardless of their ID status (Kingdom of Thailand, 2005). The coalescing of disaster and human rights reform, regarding education, provided a segway for NGOs and INGOs to continue their missions in Ranong Province with shifted focus from relief to recovery. Without such funding and partnership, some Myanmar education service providers question the extent to which MLCs could have proliferated within the province.

“If there hadn’t been so many donors in the area, I don’t think there would have been 13 Centers in Ranong. Because if there hadn’t been donors, it would have been difficult for the Centers to operate. The parents pay for their children to study, but they don’t always pay, or they don’t pay the full amount. For example, if you have 200 children and you collect at maximum 300 – 500 baht per child per month, it’s still not enough because there are so many expenses at the school whether it be teachers’ salaries, school supplies for teaching, school rent, electricity, water, transportation...there are a lot of different costs. You can’t operate for long just depending on parents’ contributions.”

*Female, Dawei Ethnicity, MLC Teacher and Co-Founder
(Personal Interview, 20 August 2022)*

The increased investment in NGO and INGO engagement since 2005 is considered a landmark year for MLCs countrywide. As Nawarat’s research also concurs, 2005 saw both an increase in MLCs, particularly in Mae Sot, as well as the parallel rise of migrant children attending school (Nawarat, 2014). Southern Thailand, which has historically received less support and attention for the needs of migrant populations as compared to areas such as Chiang Mai Province or Mae Sot in Tak Province, experienced a similar trend, although the impetus for NGO and INGO presence in Ranong Province was precipitated by tsunami.

3. Factors Hampering Provision of Education via MLCs in Ranong Province

Like national trends, MLCs in Ranong Province are hampered in their provision of education, and subsequent realization of “Education for All” and SDG Goal 4, through three key factors, although this list is not exhaustive, which includes tense relations with local authorities in Ranong, challenges securing educational pathways for continued study, and difficulties in procuring robust and resilient forms of funding.

3.1 Tense Relationships Among Ranong MLCs and Thai Authorities

The complex relationship between MLCs and local authorities was noted in an in-depth interview with one MLC teacher and founder who commented,

“Another reason that Centers had the ability to open because the local government allowed them to. The government allowed them to open because foundations came into the area, and they provided oversight of the Centers. For example, when (MLC Name Omitted) Learning Center opened, [NGO Name Omitted] provided oversight, they provided funding, and if anything happened, the NGO staff would intercede.”

*Female, Dawei Ethnicity, MLC Teacher and Co-Founder
(Personal Interview, 20 August 2022)*

Yet, while the local government allowed MLCs to operate over the years, it hasn't been without scrutiny, concern, or periodic crackdowns. As another 2006 MLC founder recounted,

“Our school faced a lot of pressure over the years. We had local authorities who would come and monitor us.”

*Male, Burmese Ethnicity, Former MLC Founder
(Personal Interview, 25 September 2022)*

Another former MLC student also remarked on this underlying tension. He recalled,

“I studied at my first Migrant Learning Center from preschool to Grade 1, but I had to move to another school because some of the teachers were arrested, and they had to temporarily close the school.”

*Male, Age 24, Dawei Ethnicity, Former MLC Student, Health Care Worker
(Personal Interview, 14 November 2022)*

A 2019 UNICEF report which featured a case study of MLCs in Ranong Province also made mention of the provincial authorities' relationship with Migrant Learning Centers writing, “As a move to improve the educational quality of MLCs, local authorities of Ranong have developed a set of standards for the 13 MLCs in Ranong to comply with or risk closure” (UNICEF, 2019: 44). UNICEF continues to describe this relationship as a “command-and-control approach,” but no official documentation on these guidelines could be found (Ibid.: 44).

3.2 Challenges in Securing Accessible Pathways for Continued Study

MLCs in Ranong Province offer three main pathways to higher education at the collegiate level which include continuing studies at Thai college, in this case the local Ranong Community College, studying at Thai universities with international programs, including both private and public universities, and studying at university in Myanmar, although this path is now largely inaccessible due to the political situation in country. Traditionally, Ranong MLCs' main target has been integrating their students back into the Myanmar system but with the volatile political situation within country many are now

turning to alternative options within Thailand and are thus gearing their curriculum towards such international opportunities through GED programs and increased coordination with Office of Non-formal and Informal Education (ONIE).

ONIE affiliation and accreditation offer some of the most cost-effective options for transitioning into tertiary programs, such as through community colleges, within Thailand but are dependent on Myanmar students obtaining sufficient fluency and literacy to make such study options viable. Additionally, this option has limited ability to provide student visas for migrants.

The GED program also provides potential for more MLC students to transition into international university programs both in Thailand and abroad as demonstrated through BEAM Education Foundation which has seen close to 600 students benefit from their program since 2010 (BEAM, 2023a: n.p.). Unfortunately, the cost of education in this domain is high with competitive, limited scholarships. Thus, it is extremely difficult for MLC graduates to find programs and monetary support to make this option viable.

3.3 Tenuous Funding Sources

Funders wavering support for Ranong MLCs aggravates their ability to operate for the long-term. While parents pay tuition fees, their support is inconsistent and can significantly waver depending on the season and changing documentation policies. For those with family who work on fishing boats, income during the rainy season comes to a halt. As one key informant shared,

“In some months, the men cannot work on the fishing boats because of the weather. They are unemployed and the mothers must collect seafood such as crabs and other things from the beach. Even with this job they cannot make income, so sometimes it is impossible for the parents to pay tuition. Now, my husband donates his [MLC teacher’s] salary to support the students to study.”

*Female, Shan Ethnicity, MLC Co-founder, Current Teacher
(Personal Interview, 14 August 2022)*

The nature of migrants’ life in Ranong is uncertain, particularly for those who make their living off fishing boats, and high costs associated with undocumented living or trying to purchase documents from agents leave little expendable income for parents. Wavering support of funders continues to aggravate operational monetary challenges faced by MLCs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The first self-reported Migrant Learning Center in Ranong Province was established in 1997, with two MLC opening shortly after, following national trends in the emergence of MLCs within the country. Distinct to MLCs located in other areas, such as in the North and Central region, the 2004 tsunami had significant impact on the proliferation of MLCs in the South, and particularly in Ranong Province. After the tsunami, the province saw increasing numbers of NGOs and other international stakeholders who recognized the need for increased migrant education efforts and who began investing in their operations; this brought the number of MLCs in Ranong Province from three to 13 at its peak and eventually provided education to almost 3,000 migrant children. Bolstering this effort was evolving

Thai educational policy in the form of Thailand's 2005 Cabinet Resolution on Education for Unregistered Persons which supported the State's commitment to "Education for All" and gave increasing space for community members in collaboration with international stakeholders to open more MLCs and teach more children nationwide.

Recommendations for Migrant Learning Centers

Continuing Education: While many MLC students hope to attend university, cost and limited scholarship opportunities make this option largely inaccessible. Yet, continuing to bolster vocational training opportunities may offset this disadvantage. Former MLC students overwhelmingly hoped for self-employment in the future. This was expressed in three common, concrete ways including having an online business, opening a physical shop, and running a restaurant. Currently, vocational training focuses primarily on computer classes and tailoring courses. It is recommended that vocational training include business management and entrepreneurial skills, including that of harnessing phone technology for business startups. While it is not suggested the current training be abandoned, it would be beneficial if vocational training in MLCs also evolved to include the above-mentioned skills in line with students' desires for more independent forms of employment.

Addressing Funding Gaps: Many respondents identified the need for more MLCs in Ranong as current demand exceeds capacity, and it was observed that the number of school-age children in school is far less than those out-of-school. While it seems unlikely the numbers of MLCs can significantly increase soon due to the extensive financial investment required for establishing, staffing, and operating MLCs, it is recommended that if the numbers cannot be increased the location of MLCs should be more broadly distributed. Currently, the three Ranong MLCs in operation are within relative proximity to one another limiting the potential student body to those within a more concentrated catchment area. By having the current MLCs relocate more distantly from one another, a more diverse pool of migrant children could potentially be reached.

Recommendations for the Thai Government

Increased Protection and Educational Bridges for MLCs: For "Education for All" and SDG Goal 4's assurance of inclusive and equitable quality education to become an inalienable right within Thailand, the Thai government must not only commit to these principles in writing and word but also in action. This is particularly critical for the most vulnerable populations living within the country, namely unregistered children and youth who are at the highest risk of exploitation without State social service mechanisms to safeguard their rights and safety. In the case of Ranong Province, Migrant Learning Centers have helped fill this void but require increased actionable commitment by the Thai government to effectively protect, serve, and educate Myanmar children within the country.

Commitment should include a variety of approaches to support comprehensive and continuous education, such as the Thai State's ongoing and bolstered efforts to provide increased avenues of registration for Migrant Learning Centers so that teachers and students can be afforded safe spaces to legally work, study, and socialize. It is also important that bridges continue to be built between various education stakeholders, such as the Thai Ministry of Education, ethnic education departments, international education agencies, and Migrant Learning Centers, towards building accreditation systems that allow for MLC

students to seamlessly transfer their studies among educational institutes, as well as be afforded the opportunity to study at higher levels.

Acknowledgement

This paper is from the author's PhD dissertation entitled "Promoting Social Inclusion and Life Opportunities of Migrant Youth via Education: A Case Study of Migrant Learning Centers in Ranong Province" at the Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University in Thailand. The author is very grateful to BEAM Education Foundation for their tireless work in promoting comprehensive and continuous access to education for Myanmar and underprivileged youth, as well as Mr. Roland Sanga, Mr. Myo Myat Thu, and the participating MLC teachers and former students who made this research possible.

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