

# BRIDGES

Participatory Action Research on the Future of  
Migrant Education in Thailand

## SUMMARY REPORT

September 2019



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Migrant children's educational prospects in Thailand have brightened greatly since 2015, when Save the Children and World Education conducted the last comprehensive research project on migrant education. Specifically, government-recognized education has now become accessible for most migrant children. Many Migrant Learning Centers now use recognized curricula (Myanmar Formal, as well as Myanmar Non-Formal and Thai Non-Formal) and therefore can provide their students with government-accredited educational certificates. Meanwhile, in 2018, the Ministerial Proclamation of Education For All (EFA) eliminated legal obstacles that had prevented migrant children from enrollment in Thai schools.

Despite these gains, more than half of all migrant children in Thailand are still out of school: the Ministry of Education and Migrant Working Group (2018) estimates the out-of-school population as 200,000 children or more. As the migrant population in Thailand has increased over the past three decades, so has the need to provide access to quality education. In order to provide an inclusive and equitable education for all migrant and out of school children there is still much work to be done to enable access to Thai Formal Government Schools and support the legal registration of Migrant Learning Centers and their teachers.

This paper reports on a large-scale Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, building on the 2015 work of Save the Children and World Education. This PAR project sought the perspectives of parents, teachers, educational leaders, and children at both Thai Formal Government Schools and Migrant Learning Centers. The survey included 1,763 participants in 47 locations: 32 Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) and 15 Thai Formal Government Schools (TFGSs), in 5 districts in Tak Province as well as Ranong Province.

## **QUALITY: Inclusive education for migrant children requires both Learning Centers and Formal Schools**

"Most of migrant students that I have taught try very hard and their education results are better than Thai students."

- Thai Formal Government School Teacher, Tha Song Yang District

The study's first finding gives cause for optimism: migrant students -- whether enrolled at Migrant Learning Centers or Thai Formal Government Schools -- consistently report that they are receiving a quality education. Similarly, their parents are largely satisfied with their choice for school enrollment and believe the school where their child is currently enrolled will provide them the most future opportunities. For example, when asked what languages are most important for their children's future success, the most frequent response by parents with children in TFGSs was Thai, followed by English. Similarly, parents with children in MLCs believed English was the most important language, followed by Myanmar language.

Migrant Learning Centers complement the Thai formal system by providing access to education for children on the fringes. MLCs help Thailand realize the goals of its inclusive educational policies by filling existing gaps and overcoming current barriers for migrant children to enroll into Thai Formal Government Schools.



Photo credit: MAF



Photo credit: TeacherFOCUS

## RECOGNITION: Migrant Learning Centers are most likely to reach out-of-school children, but they need support to do so

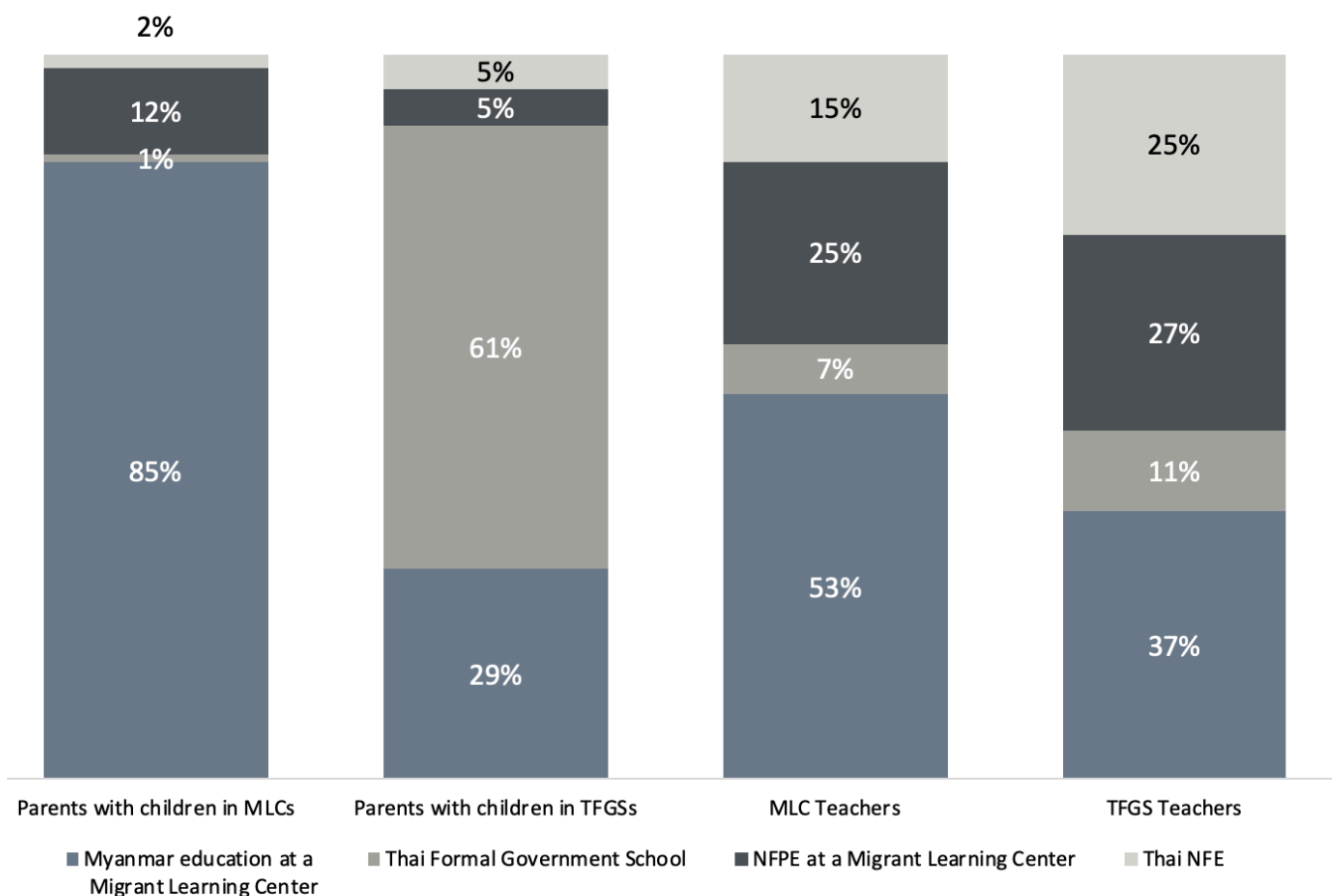
For the past three decades, migrant teachers have provided localized, culturally-sensitive mother tongue-based education for migrant children from Myanmar. 70% of surveyed teachers at Migrant Learning Centers stated they saw their career goal to be teacher. Despite their lack of formal governmental recognition or accreditation, the surveys found strong evidence of migrant teachers' experience, training and educational backgrounds.

**When asked about their greatest need, the teachers' most frequent response was *formal recognition* -- citing this more often than the need for increased salary.**

While teachers at Migrant Learning Centers remain unrecognized, in the last four years a great change has come for their students. Most of the MLCs now offer a bridge to either the Thai or Myanmar school system, via curricula that culminate in recognized educational certificates. 91% of surveyed MLC parents were confident that they could enroll their child into a Myanmar government school, should they one day return.

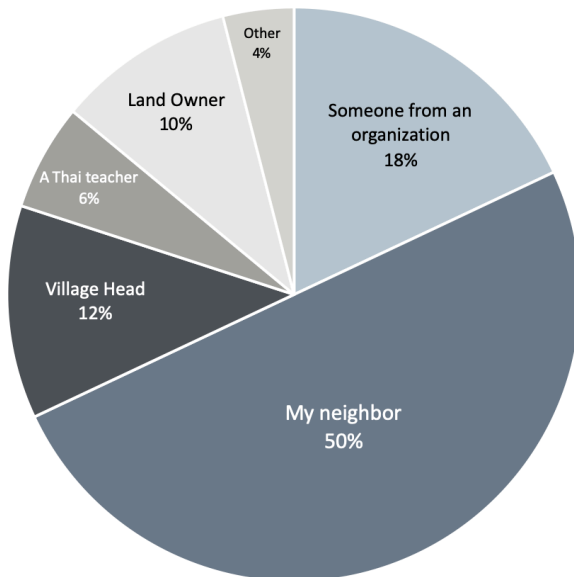
However, hundreds of thousands of migrant children remained unenrolled in any school. Overall, parents and teachers perceived Migrant Learning Centers as the most accessible education option for these out of school children, as seen in the figure below:

**Perceptions of most accessible education option for migrant children currently out of school**



## ACCESS: Migrant Learning Centers are a crucial complement to a school system otherwise out of reach for many migrants

### Person supporting migrant families to enroll their children into TFGSs



The Thai formal education system, guided by the recently revised Education For All policy, is inspiringly inclusive. All children in Thailand are entitled to the provision of 15 years of free basic education regardless of their nationality. But for many migrant families, major barriers to access still exist, primarily those of language and documentation. 62% of parents with children enrolled in a Thai Formal Government School stated they had help enrolling their children -- mostly from their neighbors, but also from local Village Heads, various organizations, and Thai teachers. Additional support mechanisms for migrant parents would likely result in greater enrollment for migrant children. However, substantial barriers previously cited in literature and confirmed in this research remain.

The access picture is much different for Migrant Learning Centers, which are devoted to the education of just this population. MLCs are a "gateway" to enroll children who have missed significant amounts of school

or who do not possess the Thai language fluency needed for success in the Thai formal system. These learning centers provide educational continuity for older or overage migrant children accompanying their parents to Thailand who, due to their age, would not be able to enter the Thai Formal system at the equivalent grade level they were attending previously in Myanmar. Older children enrolling in Thai Formal schools have largely dropped out in the past or been forced to start in a lower grade, significantly disrupting their education. In the absence of robust bilingual programs in TFGSs, there remains a need for MLCs to supplement the Thai Formal Schools for as long as the country is host to a substantial non-Thai-speaking migrant population.

## SUSTAINABILITY: A significant proportion of the migrant population sees their future in Thailand

59% of surveyed migrant teachers and 71% of migrant parents stated they had been living in Thailand for more than 10 years. Furthermore, according to the survey, 40% of migrant teachers and 43% of parents expect to stay in Thailand more than 10 years. Long-term education planning is thus possible: there exists a fairly stable community and a committed migrant teacher workforce with the potential to provide continuous mother-tongue-based education to migrant children for years to come. This research suggests that the farthest-reaching and most cost-effective solutions for many problems of migrant education would involve ratifying and investing in the Migrant Learning Centers and their teachers. Migrant parents continue to enroll their children in Migrant Learning Centers because these provide education aligned to their children's hopes and dreams for the future. Strong steps have been made to enable more migrant children to access a formal Thai education, however, barriers for migrant children to enroll and succeed at Thai Formal Government Schools remain. There is still much work to be done for inclusive education to be realized. Migrant education service providers have displayed remarkable resilience in the face of these shifting donor priorities, but the situation adds major pressure on already deficient education budgets. From the perspective of these unreached migrant children and their parents, financial and governmental support for Migrant Learning Centers cannot come too soon.

# SUMMARY of KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- A. Formal Recognition and Legalization of Migrant Learning Centers:** Migrant Learning Centers currently offer recognized mother-tongue based education relevant to migrant children. They also potentially serve as preparation centers for migrant children to transition to Thai Formal Government Schools and integrate into Thai society. Best-placed for the enrollment of OOSC, these learning centers play an important role as “safety nets” for some of the most marginalized children in Thailand. To continue in all this vital work, MLCs need a clear legalization process with flexible and achievable standards.
- B. Migrant Teacher Accreditation and Security:** Many migrant teachers possess both substantial experience and quality training. But like the schools in which they work, they need formal recognition. If either the Thai and/or Myanmar Ministry of Education could provide a pathway for these teachers’ accreditation – potentially including in-service training, distance courses, accredited summer programs, and teacher competency assessments -- the quality and stability of migrant education would continue to improve. Similarly, a formal process of legal registration and documentation are needed in order to provide needed security and stability for teachers in Migrant Learning Centers.
- C. Identification and Enrollment programs for Out-of-School Children:** In keeping with Thailand’s commitments in the ASEAN Regional Declaration on OOSCY, these children need coordinated efforts on their behalf.
- i. First, **identification:** Why are migrant children not in school? Where are they? Why are the existing channels not working for them? These questions need answers before action is possible.
  - ii. Second, **enrollment:** Parents and teachers—whether affiliated with Thai schools or migrant centers—have identified the MLCs as the most flexible educational pathway with the fewest barriers to enrollment for out-of-school migrant children.
  - iii. Third, parents need follow-up **support** to ensure these vulnerable children complete their education. It is only through the genuine participation of parents that children at risk can remain in school.
- D. Collaborative Community Awareness-Raising:** All the people involved in helping migrant children enroll in school – local Village Heads, teachers, parents, land owners, local government, employers, and NGO staff -- need a collaborative mechanism to share information. The Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) that already exist at Migrant Learning Centers are a locally-supported mechanism sensitive to work schedules, language considerations and cultural differences. Investing in existing PTAs and expanding this model to Thai Formal Government Schools would establish strong channels for sharing information about available educational pathways, the associated enrollment procedures, registration dates, and ways to address barriers to enrollment.
- E. Community Education Liaison Officers:** A corps of multilingual Community Education Liaison Officers, well-versed in EFA policies, could help those migrant parents with out-of-school children to enroll in the educational option that meets their needs (whether Migrant Learning Center or Thai Formal Government School). A good Liaison Officer would also be versed in work documentation processes; parents who do not have to hide their lack of documentation will be better able to enroll their children in Thai schools and support their children once there.

**F. Subsidization and Support to Complete Education:** Support should not stop with enrollment -- in-school migrant children are still children at risk. Many drop out of school at the age of 10 or 11 to work (Thame and Patrawart, 2017). These children need financial aid, school materials, transportation and lunches to keep them in school – whether they attend a Thai Formal Government School or a Migrant Learning Center.

**G. Stronger Government Engagement:** Governments must provide additional funding to both Thai Formal Government Schools and Migrant Learning Centers before policies such as Education For All (EFA) or cross-border initiatives can have their full impact. As things stand, vital functions of Migrant Learning Centers still depend financially on international organizations. Meanwhile, the funding sources of these NGOs continue to diminish. The inevitable result will be heightened drop-out rates -- further marginalizing children already vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. A well-educated migrant population will be a boon to Thai society and economic development, rather than a burden: a wise investment for any government to make.



Photo credit: HWF



Photo credit: TeacherFOCUS

This research was a collaborative effort by the following organizations working to promote access to high quality, recognized education for Myanmar migrant children in Thailand:



**Migrant Educational Co-ordination Center (MECC)** is an organization under Tak Primary Education Service Area Office 2 (TAK PESAO 2) and which leads coordination between MLCs, NGOs, CBOs and Government parties. All Migrant Learning Centers in Tak province are listed under MECC. Contact: <https://www.facebook.com/Migrant-Educational-Coordination-Center-TAK-PESAO-2-217234099046282/>



**B.M.W.E.C**  
Release the Potential

**The Burmese Migrant Workers' Education Committee (BMWEC)** is a community-based organization serving migrants from Myanmar in Mae Sot, Thailand. Founded in 2000, BMWEC is an administrative body for 23 migrant learning centers throughout Tak province. BMWEC is dedicated to providing quality education to migrant students, ensuring healthy, happy students with bright futures. <http://www.bmwec.org>



**Help without Frontiers Thailand Foundation (HwF)** aims to fight the root causes of poverty and discrimination and violence through education, youth empowerment, health, protection and community development for long-term sustainability. We work along the Thai-Myanmar border giving children, youth and their communities a chance for a better future. <https://helpwithoutfrontiers.org>



**The Burmese Migrant Teachers' Association (BMTA)** works to promote the rights of teachers through advocacy in collaboration with local and international education partners. BMTA promotes unity and the value of teachers by improving their status through school management training and teacher capacity building. Contact: <https://www.facebook.com/migrant.teachers>



**TeacherFOCUS Myanmar** aims to promote a flexible pathway to recognition for marginalized teachers from Myanmar who work in parallel education systems. Through contextual capacity building, media-based solutions, educational research and data-driven advocacy, we work to promote meaningful teacher integration to Myanmar. [www.teacherfocusmyanmar.org](http://www.teacherfocusmyanmar.org)



**Youth Connect Foundation** provides training, apprenticeships and career services so students can transition to safe, productive and independent lives. Through working with migrant learning centers as well as local Thai businesses and governmental authorities, Youth Connect Foundation has developed a unique and successful approach for migrant youth in Mae Sot. <http://youthconnectthailand.org>



**Marist Asia Foundation (MAF)** provides support for Burmese Migrant Families with Health and Education Programs. Marist Asia Foundation has been working in Ranong since 2006 and provides a HIV Health, Preschool, Secondary and University Online Program to give migrant children and families a brighter future. <https://www.maristasiafoundation.org>