

# Education of Migrant Children from Myanmar in Thai Government Schools

*Thithimadee Arphattananon*

Associate Professor, Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia,  
Mahidol University, Bangkok, Thailand

*thithimadee.art@mahidol.ac.th, thithimadee@yahoo.com*

## Abstract

At the dawn of the 1990s, Thailand began to accept migrant workers from neighboring countries, namely Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia to work in labor sectors to meet with the high demand for manpower due to rapid economic development. Thirty years since the early batches of migrant workers entered the country, the number of migrant workers steadily increased and reached 3.9 million in 2018. Among this number, approximately 390,015 were children. Around thirty-five percent of these children were enrolled in Thai government schools. As the government school is a place where government policy and national ideology are manifested, this paper explores the forms and effects of education provided in government schools to children of migrant workers from Myanmar. These issues are examined through the lens of how nation-states integrate migrants into their societies.

## Keywords

migrant children – Myanmar – government schools – Samut Sakhon – assimilation

## 1 Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon. Data from the World Migration Report reveals that in 2015 international migration accounted for 3.3% of the world's population (International Organization for Migration 2017, 2). Although migration itself is not new, the improvement in transportation and communication

technologies in the age of globalization has maximized the speed and scale of migration (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2009, 62). The number of people who migrated from their countries of origin to other countries escalated from 100 million in 1960, to 153 million in 2000, and 244 million in 2015 (Castles 2017, 6).

Thailand is one of the countries that has experienced a rapid flow of transnational migration. A recently published World Bank report revealed that, along with Singapore and Malaysia, Thailand is among the three most accepting countries of labor migration among the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Testaverde, Moroz, Hollweg, and Schmillen 2017, 39). In 2018, the number of non-Thai residents was estimated at 4.9 million, 3.9 million of whom were migrant workers from Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia (Harkins 2019, X). This number is projected to grow since Thailand is becoming an ageing society which has to depend on migrant workers to fill the labor shortage.

One important challenge that countries around the world face in accepting migrants is how to balance the cultural diversity and maintain the unity expressed through shared national values. In education, issues that host countries face regarding the education of migrant children include the opportunity to access education, the programs themselves and the curriculum and instruction methods that should be provided.

In Thailand, since the Thai government officially allowed migrant children to access public education in 2005, there has been a steady increase in the number of migrant students in school. In 2011, approximately 58,000 migrant students from Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia enrolled in Thai government schools. In 2017, this number had increased to 90,304 (Office of Basic Education Commission 2018).

Drawing on empirical data from a qualitative study conducted between 2016 and 2017, this study aims to examine the education provided in government schools to children of migrant workers from Myanmar and the effects of the education provided in government schools to migrant students from Myanmar. These issues are examined through a lens focusing on how nation-states have integrated migrants into their societies.

## 2 Forms of Education for Migrant Children

Scholars have examined the ways in which host countries integrate migrant children into mainstream societies through education since the early period of accepting migrants (Castles 2004, 23; Alba and Nee 2005, 35; Abu El-Haj

2015, 219). They found that the educational experiences provided to migrants vary, depending on the country's historical background and aims of education, which are often linked to nation building. This is reflected in the forms and objectives of education provided to migrant children.

At one extreme, the children of migrants are excluded from receiving the education provided by the government. This usually happens in countries that accept migrants on a temporary basis, i.e., guest workers or fixed-term laborers such as in Japan, Singapore, and Germany prior to 1973. In rare cases when education is provided, migrant children are put in separate schools or separate classes from native-born children. A more common approach adopted by countries such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and France, is to integrate migrants into mainstream society. In those countries, children of migrants are entitled to receive public education, however, they are required to shed their cultural identity and adapt themselves to the culture of the host country. The aim is that, over time, migrants will be "assimilated" and become indistinguishable from the native citizens in their cultural practices such as speech, dress, disposition and ways of life. The U.S., "melting pot" model, which symbolizes the attempt to "Americanize" immigrants, is a good example of this approach. The assimilation approach in education regards the cultures of minority students as deficient and inferior to the mainstream culture. Therefore, schools have a duty to transform migrant children into civilized individuals by teaching them to speak the dominant language, to have proper manners and to accept and internalize the cultural norms and values of the host country (Nieto 2004, 384). Assimilation occurs in various forms and degrees—as a one-way process of adaptation by migrants or as a more gradual process which requires mutual adjustment by both migrants and citizens in the host country. The latter is sometimes called "integration". Castles (2009, 57) notes that although integration signifies a gradual process and a certain degree of cultural acceptance, its final goal is to absorb migrants into the mainstream culture. Both "assimilation" and "integration" are grounded within the nationalist discourse that regards the cultures of host countries as superior to the cultures of migrants.

Countering the assimilation approach is multicultural education. Instead of transforming the cultures of migrant children to be similar to mainstream culture, scholars who advocate human rights, social justice and democratic education suggest that the cultures of migrant children should be respected. In countries that adopt this model, migrants can retain their distinctive identities, such as language and cultural practices, while participating in mainstream society (Castles 2004, 25). Unlike with the assimilation approach, migrants are not expected to give up their cultural identity to be part of the host society. In

education, multiculturalism is reflected in a form of education that values the cultures that migrant children bring to schools, i.e., languages, cultural norms, values and uses those cultures as a bridge for migrant children to learn and be part of the mainstream culture. Practices such as bilingual education and culturally relevant pedagogy are examples of the multiculturalism approach in education. Banks (2009, 28) contends that although minority students should develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to participate in the host country, they should not do so by completely giving up their own culture. Schools that adhere to the multiculturalism approach, should help students acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed to participate not only in the national civic culture but also in their community culture, as well as the global culture. However, critics point out that by focusing too much on visible and static cultures, multicultural education defeats its purpose of challenging injustice and racism in schools and in society (McLaren 1995, 41; May and Sleeter 2010, 7; Arphattananon 2021, 3).

As transnational migration has become more prominent, it has become clear that migrant students form multiple identities and forge a sense of belonging to multiple communities that transcend national boundaries (Abu El-Haj 2015, 219; Castles 2004, 42). Scholars propose that schools should acknowledge the transnational experiences of migrant students and the social bonding and political commitment that they have with their host and home countries (Abu El-Haj 2015, 219; Banks 2019, 19). The transnational approach to education is based on the notion that the cultural identities of some migrants are not fixed or attached within a national boundary. In this approach, instead of preparing students to be citizens of a particular nation, education should prepare students to be citizens of the world who commit to social justice and equality in the local and global contexts (Abu El-Haj 2015, 222). Starkey (2017, 43) uses the term “cosmopolitan citizenship education” to denote the educational approach that “provides a way of looking at the world and making judgments on the basis of the universal standard of human rights” rather than the narrow focus of the nation-state. In an era of global migration, many children live in lands where they do not belong as “citizens”. Education that centers around imagined national communities excludes these young people from civic participation. Cosmopolitan citizenship education focuses on human rights and social justice beyond national boundaries. Banks (2019, 15–16) proposes a conceptual framework for developing civic education for migrant children who are non-citizens called “human rights cosmopolitan education”. Similar to Starkey (2017), the model of civic education emphasizes the needs for education that empowers students—citizens and non-citizens alike—to participate actively as citizens of a global community beyond one’s nationality.

Instead of an education that concentrates on forging national identification in students, Banks (2019, 22) proposes that in the age of transnational migration, schools should educate students to identify with “cultural, national, regional and global” communities.

### 3 Education of Migrant Children in Thailand: An Overview

At the dawn of the 1990s, Thailand began to accept migrant workers from neighboring countries, namely Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia to work in labor sectors to meet the high demand for manpower due to rapid economic development. Thirty years since the early batches of migrant workers entered the country, the number of migrant workers from these three countries has steadily increased and reached 3.9 million in 2018. Migrant workers are mostly employed in labor-intensive sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacture, fisheries and households. Data in the year 2017 indicates that, among all migrant workers from the three countries, migrant workers from Myanmar accounted for 68.5% (Smith, Lim, and Harkins 2019, 17).

Since Thailand does not have a policy that bars labor migrants from bringing their dependents, some migrant workers brought with them their children and some gave birth to children in Thailand. The exact number of migrant children from the three countries is unknown due to the lack of a registration system for dependent minors who are not in the workforce and incomplete data on the number of newborn migrants. The estimated number of migrant children was around 390,015 in 2014 (World Education and Save the Children 2014, 15). Before 2005, children who did not have Thai citizenship were not allowed to receive education in government schools. Enrollment for stateless children and refugee children was restricted to schools in designated areas (Wongpolganon 2007, 52), but some schools with a humanitarian conscience allowed migrant students to enroll despite government restrictions. A number of non-profit organizations also set up classes to provide basic literacy skills and the 3Rs<sup>1</sup> to migrant children. At that time, several sectors, including civil society organizations, representatives of stateless and displaced persons and international organizations consistently pushed for recognition of the right to education of stateless and displaced children. Several conferences and forums were held (Nawarat 2012, 957) and, as a result, the children's rights were recognized in law in the 1999 National Education Act which stipulated that “all individuals shall have equal rights and opportunities to receive twelve years

---

<sup>1</sup> Reading, writing, and arithmetic.

of free basic education provided by the state. Such education provided on a nationwide basis shall be of quality and free of charge” (Office of the National Education Commission 1999, 8). Subsequently, in July 2005, the Thai government, through a cabinet resolution, officially stated that all children in Thailand, regardless of their citizenship or legal status, are entitled to receive a basic education from kindergarten to the last year of lower secondary education, which marks the completion of compulsory education (Ministry of Education 2018, 48). The Ministry of Education grants a per-head subsidy to schools that enroll migrant children similar to that provided for Thai students. Schools use this budget to make lunches, learning materials and extracurricular activities available to migrant students.

In spite of this policy, fewer than half of migrant children have enrolled in government schools. Financial problems are the main reason for this, followed by a lack of understanding of the policy both among migrant parents and school personnel (Arphattananon 2012, 2; Roman and Chaunprapan 2019, 99). In the academic year 2017, the number of migrant children enrolled in schools under the jurisdiction of the Office of Basic Education, Ministry of Education was 90,304 or 34 percent of the total estimated number of migrant children in Thailand. Although still small in number, data shows that there has been a steady increase in the number of migrant students enrolled in government schools (See Table1).

Besides education in government schools, approximately 5 percent of migrant children attend non-formal education centers under the Ministry of Education or migrant learning centers (MLC s). The other 60 percent, or around 238,402 of migrant children, remain out of school (World Education and Save the Children 2014, 16). Expanding educational opportunities to more migrant

TABLE 1      Number of Migrant Students in Government Schools

Country	Myanmar	Cambodia	Laos	Total number of students from the three countries in government schools
Year				
2011	48,565	6,580	3,452	58,687
2014	53,768	13,977	5,117	72,862
2015	55,376	17,472	5,959	78,807
2016	58,143	21,508	6,911	86,562
2017	58,314	24,321	7,669	90,304

SOURCE: OFFICE OF BASIC EDUCATION COMMISSION (2018)

children is undeniably the most pressing issue. However, another issue that has been less explored is the form of education that is provided to migrant children.

4 Research Method

This study was conducted between May 2016 and April 2017. I selected Samut Sakhon province as the study site because government schools in the province enroll a large number of migrant children from Myanmar and the province has the second largest number of migrant workers from Myanmar after Bangkok. At the time when the research was conducted, 2,085 migrant students were enrolled in schools under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. For this study, I selected three government schools with the largest number of migrant students in the province. Table 2 shows the number of migrant students and Thai students in the three schools in the academic year 2016. It should be noted that all the migrant students in the three schools were from Myanmar.

Qualitative research methods of interview, observation and document examination were used to collect data. At the three schools, I interviewed the following people: principals, heads of academic affairs, teachers, Thai students and migrant students. I also interviewed migrant parents and the head of the educational promotion department at the Samut Sakhon Primary Educational Service Area Office. In total, 27 interviews were conducted, all of which were recorded with permission from the interviewees. Besides the interviews, I also conducted classroom observation, observation of the morning assembly and observation of other special activities organized by the schools. I examined documents such as each school’s annual action plan, activity plans and student essays. For data analysis, interview transcripts, field notes and observation notes were read through and coded. All the codes were grouped into related themes. Data from the three schools which fell into the same themes

TABLE 2      Number of Thai and Migrant Students in the Three Schools\*

Schools’ Names**	Total Students	Thai Students	Migrant Students
Sutthikhun	687	394 (57%)	293 (43%)
Mangklatham	163	11 (10%)	152 (90%)
Ruamjairat	1,064	995 (93.5%)	69 (6.5%)

\*As of June 10th, 2016 \*\* All names are pseudonyms



was grouped. Cross-school comparison was conducted to find commonality and differences. Themes were then linked together to identify patterns and relationships.

In conducting this research, I adhered to the ethical guidelines for research with human subjects of Mahidol University. Before conducting the research, I submitted the research proposal and interview questions to the Institution Review Board of the University and obtained its approval. Throughout the research, the autonomy and privacy of the participants were protected. Participants had the choice to participate or drop out of the study at any time. Personal, identifiable data was not collected in the study and the names of the participants and the schools were changed to protect confidentiality.

## 5 Research Findings

### 5.1 *Enrollment, Placement, and Preparation Class*

The three schools which participated in the study were all government schools; Sutthikhun School and Mangklatham School are under the jurisdiction of the Office of Basic Education, Ministry of Education; and Ruamjairat School is a municipal school under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. Sutthikhun School and Ruamjairat School are educational opportunity extension schools which provide education from kindergarten to lower secondary education. Mangklatham School is a primary school providing education from kindergarten to the primary education level. Aligning with the education policy of the Thai government, the three schools accept all students regardless of their nationality or legal status. However, due to the Ministry of Education's changing budget allocation policy, the schools gave priority to accepting migrant children who had birth certificates or the 13-digit identification number in order to qualify for a government subsidy.<sup>2</sup> School principals said in the interview that, in many cases, the schools enrolled migrant students even though they did not have any identification document. The schools used their own budget or asked migrant parents to pay a small fee to register their children into the system and issued them with the 13-digit number.

The three schools enrolled migrant children under six years old in kindergarten classes. Those over six who had never enrolled in a Thai school were

---

2 To avoid the problem of schools registering students who did not physically exist or the duplicated registration of the same student in multiple schools, the Ministry of Education uses a 13-digit identification number as a means of identifying students and allocating budgets to schools.



put in 1st-grade class by default and only on rare occasions did schools organize equivalence tests that allowed migrant students to attend classes that were appropriate for their skills and proficiency. As a result, migrant students were generally rather older than their Thai classmates.

Of the three schools, only Sutthikhun School had a preparation class for migrant students from Myanmar. This preparation class had around 23 to 25 students and was sponsored by the local non-government organization and a seafood company. The non-government organization provided support in the form of a teacher assistant who helped to translate between Mon or Burmese and the Thai. The preparation class was set up to familiarize migrant students with the culture of the school and Thai society. This one-year class taught students the Thai language, culture and etiquette, as well as hygiene and the school's code of conduct. The principal of the school revealed that during the years 2005 to 2008 when the school started to enroll migrant students, Thai parents were concerned that migrant children were disease-carriers and were reluctant to send their children to the school. As a result, the school had to set up the preparation class partly to mitigate the Thai parents' concerns and facilitate a smooth transition for the migrant children into the Thai education system. According to observation, the migrant students learned the Thai alphabet, phonics, reading and writing, and Thai national symbols such as the national anthem, Thai flag and the kings. Students were taught to wash their hands before and after eating and were instructed to keep their nails and bodies clean. Behavior such as eating with their hands, spitting and wearing *thanaka*<sup>3</sup> powder on their faces was banned. The preparation class was designed to integrate migrant students into Thai society, effectively to make them indistinguishable from others. In the two other schools in the study, where there was no preparation class, the migrant students studied the Thai language and culture and the school's code of conduct alongside the Thai students in regular classes.

## 5.2 Curriculum Content and Instruction Methods

The three schools followed the B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008) Basic Education Core Curriculum. The curriculum content and instruction methods were the same for all students; there was no specific curriculum for migrant students. The principals in the three schools voiced similar opinions that, since migrant children from Myanmar currently reside in Thailand and might continue to live in Thailand in the future, they have to learn the same content as other Thai

---

3 The yellowish powder made from tree bark. People from Myanmar normally apply *Thanaka* powder to their faces.

students in order for them to understand Thai culture, Thai values and Thai history as well as the social, economic and political contexts of Thailand.

*“Since they [migrant students] live in Thailand, they should learn about Thailand. They should learn our national anthem, learn to be loyal to our country. We have to teach them to be a morally upright person because, in the future, we do not know if they are going to return to their country. They might be here forever. We teach them our culture and our way of life so that they can function well in Thai society. If we do not teach them, they will remain barbarians.”*

Principal of Sutthikhun School, personal interview, May 9, 2016

In other words, the instruction and curriculum of the three schools aimed at preparing migrant students from Myanmar to internalize Thai culture and identity. The content of the curriculum and its aim was indistinguishable from that taught to Thai students, namely, to prepare them to be good citizens of Thailand.

The culture of the migrant students from Myanmar were sometimes mentioned in class when topics or content were related to their country. For example, in the Thai language classes, the teachers asked migrant students how they called this or that in their tongue. In social studies, in the unit about the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the teacher taught about traditional dress, food, flags, economy and the history of those countries. However, since most of the migrant students in the three schools were Mons—an ethnic minority group in Myanmar—the content related to Myanmar taught in schools was irrelevant to them and sometimes caused resentment. Other occasions on which the migrant students could express their culture were on special days such as Children’s Day and New Year’s Day. At Mangklatham School, students were asked to wear their traditional dress to school on Tuesdays as it was designated to be a national costume day.

None of the schools provided a culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy such as bilingual education or using their cultures as a bridge for learning. Sutthikhun School and Mangklatham School used to have native teachers from Myanmar teach Burmese and Mon language to students and school staff. However, after the native teachers resigned, the schools ceased offering Burmese language classes.

At the schools in which a large number of migrant students from Myanmar were enrolled, the history lessons detailing wars between Ayutthaya Kingdom and Burma were a challenging issue. One of the teachers said in the interview

that she had to teach content in the textbook since it would appear in the national test. However, she said that she stressed to the students that all the fighting and wars happened in the past. Nowadays, Thailand and Myanmar are business partners and enjoy good relations. The teachers whom I interviewed stated that migrant students seemed to understand this and did not express any bitterness. Interviews with the children themselves revealed similar results; studying this version of history did not make them feel hostile towards Thailand and Thais because of the one-sided take on history. One migrant student from Mon said in an interview that *“Those stories happened in the past. Nowadays we do not carry weapons and kill each other like that.”*

### 5.3 Socialization Process of the Schools

All three schools made an effort not to single out migrant students for special treatment, and cultural differences were not accentuated.

*“We do not point out cultural differences. Children integrate well when they are together. There is no problem. They [migrant students] are all well assimilated and are like Thai children.”*

Deputy principal of academic affairs, Sutthikhun School, Personal interview, September 10, 2016

At the three schools, words such as “assimilated”, “integrated”, “blended” were used to describe the relationship between the migrant and Thai students. The schools underscored the fact that they treated Thai students and migrant students the same; all students were entitled to receive a scholarship and anyone could participate in school activities such as sports, art competitions or Thai language contests. Teachers emphasized that they did not see differences and did not separate students according to their nationality. *“For us, they are “our students”—the same, no matter whether they are Thai or migrant”* (Principal of Sutthikhun School, personal interview, May 9, 2016). Thai virtues such as respect for elders, generosity, good manners and proper Thai language skills were taught to Thai and migrant students in the same way. In an attempt to make migrant students blend in with Thai students, all the cultural markers which distinguish migrant students from Thai students were prohibited, i.e., the wearing of *thanaka* powder and the use of the mother tongue at school. *“If they wear the school uniform, they all look alike”* (Teacher in Sutthikhun School, personal interview, July 2, 2016). Despite these efforts, though, people were able to tell the children apart from the name embroidered on their uniform; migrant students had single names with no surnames while Thai students had both personal names and surnames.

Most of the migrant students whom I interviewed were born in Thailand, had studied in Thai schools, socialized in Thai society and had internalized Thai values. Although many of them said that they could communicate in their mother tongue, they were more fluent in Thai. Most of the students said that they wanted to live and work in Thailand after graduating from school because they were born and raised here. Most migrant students from Myanmar considered themselves as having multiple identities—they thought of themselves as being members of Thai society, albeit without citizenship, but when they were with people of the same ethnic group, they felt equal members of that community. When I asked a student what she would say if someone wanted to know who she was, she answered: *“I would tell people that I am Mon. But I love Thailand no less than Thai people”* (Mon student in Sutthikhun School, personal communication, February 7, 2017).

According to observation, Thai students and migrant students of the three schools got along well; they studied and participated in activities in schools together without self-identifying themselves as “Thai” or “immigrant”. Interviews with teachers and students resonated with this view with the observation that migrant students and Thai students had an amicable relationship. Teachers reported that fighting and bickering among students in school were caused by individual conflicts not because of nationality or ethnic differences. There were few cases of Thai students losing their self-control and verbally vilifying migrant students over their nationality. However, interviews with students—both Thai and migrant—revealed that migrant students from Myanmar were still the target of racist remarks; some of them were urged to “go back to your country” and some faced name-calling.

Teachers said in the interviews that because Thai and migrant students had studied together since kindergarten or 1st grade, they were familiar with each other and could get along well. When there was a fight between Thai and migrant students, teachers reported that they borrowed the Thai proverb of “eating rice from the same pot” to reprimand students and to teach them that they should not fight because they belonged to the same group and studied together in the same school.

## 6 Conclusion and Discussion

Situating the findings from this research with the conceptual framework of how host countries integrate migrants into mainstream society, it is clear that Thailand does not take the exclusionary approach of prohibiting migrant workers from reuniting with their families. The Thai government has a “progressive

and generous policy” of allowing the children of migrant workers to access free public education in the same way as the children of Thai citizens (UNICEF 2019, 1). From the research findings, it is evident that schools and school personnel take an assimilation approach in integrating migrant children from Myanmar into Thai society. That is, they expect that migrant students from Myanmar to adapt themselves to Thai culture and Thai values instantly after being accepted by the schools. The function of the preparation class at Sutthikhun school described above is a case in point. The curriculum content and instruction approaches in the three schools in this study were Thai-centric, centering around a Thai nationalist discourse and worldview, especially in history classes. The cultures of the migrant students from Myanmar seldom had a place in the curriculum content. Any identity markers which would distinguish migrant students from Thai students were prohibited or allowed only on special occasions. The goal of the schools was to assimilate all students rather than treat certain groups differently. Multicultural education such as in the form of Burmese language classes was provided intermittently. The mentioning of the languages and sociopolitical contexts of the students’ homeland occurred infrequently in class, depending on each individual teacher. Results from the study show that migrant students did not resist this form of assimilationist education. They internalized Thai culture, values and worldview and forged a sense of belonging to Thai society. In the three participating schools, migrant students from Myanmar were elected to be class leaders or chairs of the school student council. Teachers consistently praised the migrant students from Myanmar as hard-working, polite, generous and very considerate.

However, the assimilation approach did not challenge the perceptions that Thai people have towards migrants from Myanmar. In his seminal work, Chutintaranond (1992, 94–98) delineated how the historical narrative of the Burmese as a national enemy has been used to reinforce a sense of patriotism among Thais since the formation of the nation-state from the late 19th century. Chutintaranond (1992, 95–97) explicated how, for more than one hundred years, the image of the Burmese as “intruder” and “enemy”, has been passed on through the history curriculum and re-emphasized by popular media such as novels, play, and movies. This has penetrated into Thai people’s mindset and the negative images of the Burmese have been formed. Previously these negative images were not activated because ordinary Thai people had few chances to meet people from Myanmar. However, at the end of the 1980s when the Thai government began to accept migrant workers from neighboring countries, including Myanmar, to fill the domestic manpower shortage, the number of migrant workers from Myanmar began to increase steadily. They are everywhere in Thailand—in restaurants, in gasoline stations, in markets

and on the streets. As Thai people had more chances to be in contact with migrant workers from Myanmar, they drew on the previously implanted frame of reference of the Burmese as “enemy” and “intruders”, when socializing with migrant workers from Myanmar. This frame of reference resulted in Thai people having a prejudice against migrants from Myanmar as is evident in previous research and the findings from this study. For example, in a study that examined the opinions of Thai people towards migrants and refugees, it is revealed that Thai people perceived migrant workers and refugees from Myanmar as “disease-carriers” and a “threat” to Thai people’s lives and property (Sunpuwan and Niyomsilpa 2012, 54).<sup>4</sup> In this study, the principal in one school explained that Thai parents saw migrant children from Myanmar as unhygienic and “barbarians”. That is why the school had to have a preparation class to make them more “civilized”. Even the school policies that prohibited migrant students from Myanmar from wearing any identity markers imply that the cultures of migrant students were seen as inferior to Thai culture. In having such policies, the principals and teachers in the study unmistakably meant well for migrant students to assimilate into Thai society for the students’ benefits. However, it is also implied that the cultures of migrant students are not accepted and respected. Migrant students from Myanmar were praised by teachers, as polite and considerate because they conformed to the Thai cultural norms, not because of their cultural identities.

The assimilation approach that school personnel used as shown in this study will not change the negative images that Thai people have towards migrants from Myanmar. Neither will it help Thai students understand their migrant friends from Myanmar. As revealed in this study, there were incidents of bickering, small fights, name-calling and racist remarks between Thai and migrant students. From this study, I recommend that, instead of the assimilation approach, schools should adopt a multicultural and transitional approach in educating Thai and migrant students. Content in a subject such as history should move away from inculcating patriotism and nationalism by emphasizing the glory of the Thai nation and its superiority over other neighboring countries (Phrompanya 2014, 115). The cultures of migrant students should be incorporated into the curriculum. Thai students should be taught skills such as having an open mind towards other cultures. Lessons and activities that

---

4 As I am writing this article, the situation of COVID-19 was exacerbated as more than 500 new cases were found among migrant workers in Samut Sakhon province. This confirms Thai people’s perceptions of migrant workers from Myanmar as “disease carriers”. Many Thai people put the blame on migrant workers from Myanmar as the main cause of the second wave of the pandemic in Thailand.

attempt to reduce prejudice and stereotyping should be implemented in all schools not limited to schools that enroll migrant students. This is because, according to Banks (2009, 29), in a globalized world in which transnational migration happens at a rapid pace, all students must be prepared to function well in at least three cultural spheres: the community culture, the national culture and the global culture. The pedagogy, as well as content in the curriculum, should be reconsidered to prepare both Thai and migrant students to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes to function in Thai national civic culture and as in a globalized world.

### References

- Abu El-Haj, Thea Renda. 2015. *Unsettled Belonging: Educating Palestinian American Youth after 9/11*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Alba, Richard, and Victor Nee. 2005. "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration." In *The New Immigration: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, edited by Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, Carola Suarez-Orozco, and Desiree Qin, 35–66. New York: Routledge.
- Arphattananon, Thithimadee. 2012. "Education that Leads to Nowhere: Thailand's Education Policy for Children of Migrants." *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 14(1): 1–15.
- Arphattananon, Thithimadee. 2021. "Breaking the Mold of Liberal Multicultural Education in Thailand through Social Studies Lessons." *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 94(2): 53–62.
- Banks, James A. 2009. "Multicultural Education: Dimensions and Paradigms." In *The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education*, edited by James A. Banks, 9–32. New York: Routledge.
- Banks, James A. 2019. "A Transformative Civic Education for Non-Citizen and Citizen Students." A Keynote Address at the Korean Association for Multicultural Education 11th International Conference, *Multicultural education and diversity: Driving the potential for changing societies in a globalizing world* (May 22–24, 2019), Seoul, South Korea.
- Castles, Stephen. 2004. "Migration, Citizenship, and Education." In *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives*, edited by James A. Banks, 17–48. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Castles, Stephen. 2009. "World Population Movements, Diversity, and Education." In *The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education*, edited by James A. Banks, 49–61. New York: Routledge.



- Castles, Stephen. 2017. "The Challenge of International Migration in the 21st Century." In *Citizenship Education and Global Migration: Implications for Theory, Research and Teaching*, edited by James A. Banks, 3–21. Washington D.C.: American Educational Research Association.
- Chutintaranond, Sunait. 1992. "The Image of the Burmese Enemy in Thai Perceptions and Historical Writings." *Journal of the Siam Society* 80(1): 89–103
- Harkins, Benjamin, ed. 2019. *Thailand Migration Report 2019*. Bangkok: 2019 United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand.
- International Organization for Migration. 2017. *World Migration Report 2018*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.
- May, Stephen, and Christine Sleeter. 2010. "Introduction: Critical Multiculturalism: Theory and Praxis." In *Critical Multiculturalism: Theory and Praxis*, edited by Stephen May and Christine E. Sleeter, 1–16. New York: Routledge.
- McLaren, Peter. 1995. "White Terror and Oppositional Agency: Towards a Critical Multiculturalism." In *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Difference*, edited by Christine E. Sleeter and Peter McLaren, 33–70. New York: SUNY Press.
- Ministry of Education. 2018. *Handbook and Guidelines for Providing Education for Persons without Legal Status or Thai Citizenship*. Bangkok: Ministry of Education.
- Nawarat, Nongyao. 2012. "Thailand Education Policy for Migrant Children from Burma." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 47: 956–961.
- Nieto, Sonia. 2004. *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*. 4th edition. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Office of Basic Education Commission. 2018. "Number of pupils enrolled in Thai schools (by nationalities)." <https://portal.bopp-obec.info/obec59/>.
- Thailand: Office of the National Education Commission, Office of the Prime Minister. 1999. *National Education Act of B.E.2542 (1999)*. <https://asean.org/storage/2016/08/Thailand184.pdf>.
- Phrompanya, Manoch. 2014. "Burmese in Thai Textbooks." In *Nationalism in Thai Textbooks*, 2nd edition, edited by Sunait Chutintaranond, 82–125. Bangkok: Matichon Publishing House.
- Roman, Victor, and Sowirin Chuanprapun. 2019. "Strengthening Access to Services for Migrant Children in Thailand." In *Thailand Migration Report 2019*, edited by Benjamin Harkins, 99–116. Bangkok: 2019 United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand.
- Smith, Harry, Reuben Lim, and Benjamin Harkins. 2019. "Thailand Migration Profile." In *Thailand Migration Report 2019*, edited by Benjamin Harkins, 9–25. Bangkok: 2019 United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand.
- Starkey, Hugu. 2017. "Globalization and Education for Cosmopolitan Citizenship." In *Citizenship Education and Global Migration: Implications for Theory, Research*

- and Teaching*, edited by James A. Banks, 41–62. Washington, DC: The American Educational Research Association.
- Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo, and Carola Suarez-Orozco. 2009. "Globalization, Immigration, and Schooling." In *The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education*, edited by James A. Banks, 62–76. New York: Routledge.
- Sunpuwan, Malee, and Sakkarin Niyomsilpa. 2012. "Perception and Misperception: Thai Government Opinions on Refugees and Migrants from Myanmar." *Journal of Population and Social Studies* 21(1): 47–58.
- Testaverde, Mauro, Harry Moroz, Claire H. Hollweg, and Achim Schmillen. 2017. *Migrating to Opportunity: Overcoming Barriers to Labor Mobility in Southeast Asia*. Washington D.C.: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank.
- UNICEF. 2019. *Education Knows no Borders: A Collection of Good Practices and Lessons Learned on Migrant Education in Thailand*. Bangkok: UNICEF Thailand. <https://www.unicef.org/thailand/media/3696/file/Education%20knows%20no%20border%20-%20report.pdf>.
- Wongpolganjan, Juajan. 2007. "Mon Nationalism and the Invention of Traditions: The Case of the Mons in their Diasporic Communities." *MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities* 10(1): 50–71.
- World Education and Save the Children. 2014. *Pathway to a Better Future: A Review of Education for Migrant Children in Thailand*. Bangkok: World Education and Save the Children. <http://thailand.worlded.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/MESR-Full-Report.pdf>.