

Education Barriers

for Children from migrant and Refugee Communities in Thailand



SUBMITTED BY

*Mabel Thwe
Myanmar Project*

People's Empowerment Foundation



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FOUNDATION**
มูลนิธิศึกษาภาพชุมชน



Thailand, a neighboring country of Myanmar, is grappling with an urgent humanitarian crisis due to the prevailing political crisis in Myanmar. Apart from the tens of thousands of migrant workers who have been working in Thailand for many years, the country is now confronted with a significant influx of Myanmar refugees following the 2021 coup in Myanmar and the intensified violence. According to data provided by UNHCR as of June 2023, Thailand is currently sheltering 91,337 refugees from Myanmar in nine temporary camps along the border.[1] These camps have been in existence since the 1980s, and nearly half of the camp's population comprises children. Furthermore, there are 4,799 urban refugees and asylum seekers residing in various other regions of Thailand.[2] Following the coup in Myanmar, over 10,000 school-aged children were displaced to Mae Sot, a city adjacent to Mawaddy in Myanmar.[3]

Being “Unknown”: A Lack of Legal Identity

Undocumented children in the migrant education landscape can be broadly categorized into four groups:

1. Children born to migrant worker parents.

- 2. Children residing in nine refugee camps along the border.
- 3. Children from urban refugee and asylum seeker families, both pre and post-coup.
- 4. Others with varied circumstances.

Children from urban refugee and asylum seeker families mostly face the challenge of lacking any form of legal identity due to fleeing conflict zones and emergency situations. Some were born in hiding within jungles while their parents flee from Myanmar Military attacks, or their legal identities were lost when their villages were destroyed during conflicts. These children essentially exist as "unknown" entities since they lack even the most basic document, such as a birth registration.

For all these groups of undocumented students, the current political situation makes it nearly impossible to return to Myanmar and obtain a national ID card or passport. Similarly, acquiring legal identification in Thailand presents challenges because they are not recognized as Thai citizens particularly children from migrant worker families and those residing in the nine refugee camps. As for students from



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The Migrant Learning Centers

Since 1990, an influx of migrant students has led to the establishment of Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) by Non-Governmental Organizations, local Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), and religious faith-based organizations along the Thai-Myanmar border. These MLCs were created to ensure continuous education for displaced children. Prior to the Myanmar coup, approximately 13,000 Myanmar students were enrolled in 65 MLCs that operated under the oversight of the Migrant Education Coordination Center (MECC).[4] The informal permission granted by the government of Thailand through MECC allowed these MLCs to gain a degree of legitimacy. However, the status of MLCs is difficult to be termed as “schools” due to Thai education system.

Among the 65 existing MLCs, the level of education provided varies based on the capacity and resources available to each center. Some MLCs offer only elementary or GED programmes, while others provide a comprehensive education starting from kindergarten or Grade 1 to Grade 12 level. However, there is no standardized curriculum among these

schools, and the language of instructions are Burmese, English, or Karen. There are different accreditation pathways after students complete their Grade 12 level education at MLCs.

Understanding different pathways in the migrant education landscape

(1) Myanmar Accredited Education Pathway

1.1 Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE)

NFPE pathway is open for overage students who are at least 10 years old and able to read and write Burmese. This pathway is the best for students who are working and studying at the same time as it only requires to attend one day per week. It takes 2 years for students to complete Grade 1 to Grade 4 of Burmese primary education national curriculum. After completing primary level classes, students can either join NFME or MLCs formal education system.[5]

1.2 Non-Formal Middle-School Education (NFME)

NFME provides middle-school level education for overage students who are at least 13 years old and having Grade 4 level certificate. NFME takes 3 years to complete and after completion, students can take Grade 8 board exam recognized by Myanmar Education System.[6]

1.3 MLCs Formal Education Pathway

Some MLCs provide a full Grade 1 to Grade 12 education based on the Burmese national curriculum. This full-time course takes 12 years for students to complete, with the option to take grade 4, 8, and 12 board exams recognized by the Myanmar Education System. However, this pathway, intended for students wishing to return to Myanmar for study and work, is currently impractical due to the crisis in Myanmar.[7]

(2) Thailand Accredited Education Pathway

2.1 Thai Formal Education Systems

In 1999, the Royal Thai Government implemented the Education for All Policy, and in 2005, they passed a cabinet resolution that enabled all children, including those without proper documentation, to enroll in the formal Thai 12-year basic education system without facing document-related obstacles. This initiative allows Thai Public Schools (TPS) to issue identity cards with the code "G" specifically for undocumented students.[8] It's important to note that this ID code is officially recognized only by the Ministry of Education and not by the civil registration sector.[9] Nevertheless, these ID cards grant students access to TPS without any security concerns or legal impediments. TPS provide kindergarten to grade 12 level education, and the Thai government gives recognized certificates after the students complete kindergarten level, grade 6, grade 9 and grade 12 levels. The school-time is from 8 am to 3 pm. After completion of grade 12, the students can join the Thai higher education system and attend Thai universities with accredited certificates from Thai government. The students who complete bachelor's degree in Thai universities can obtain a Thai ID card.[10]

Nonetheless, this pathway faces limited popularity due to the following factors. Firstly, TPS employ Thai as the sole language of instruction, leading to language barriers, especially among children who have arrived at different ages after the coup. Secondly, TPS fees are somewhat higher compared to MLCs, making it challenging for parents to cover both school and uniform expenses.



2.2 Thai Non-Formal Education System (Kor Sor Nor)

This non-formal curriculum comprises six years (Grade 1 to 6) in the first two years, followed by another two years (Grade 7 to 9), and the final two years (Grade 10 to 12). Students who complete grades 6, 9, and 12 receive accredited certificates from the Thai Education System. Enrollment in this program requires students to be at least 15 years old and possess basic Thai language skills equivalent to a grade 3 student.

Unlike Thai formal public schools, the Kor Sor Nor program is not full-time; students typically attend only one day per week. Those who finish grade 12 can access Thai universities, and completing a bachelor's degree in a Thai university enables them to obtain a Thai ID card.[11]

While there are no fees to enroll in the Kor Sor Nor program, the lack of Thai language skills is a significant barrier, particularly for new arrivals following the coup. Some MLCs offer hybrid systems that integrate Thai language courses with their own formal education pathway (Grade 1 to 12). After completing grade 12 at MLCs, students in these hybrid programs transition to the Kor Sor Nor program with the goal of gaining access to Thai universities.

(3) GED Pathway (International)

Starting from 2008, the MLCs started to adopt the American High School General Education Development (GED) System to overcome the accreditation barriers. With the GED test certificate after the completion of GED program at the MLCs, students can apply for universities since GED is regarded as equivalent to high school certificates. There, the blocked ways to continue their university education were opened and students were able to apply for scholarships and successfully enroll in universities.

(4) Vocational Education

For youth who choose not to pursue formal education, various NGOs and CSOs offer vocational education, internships, and skill training, encompassing practical and life skills, Thai language proficiency, leadership skills, and more. Students with grade 9 certificates from the Thai formal education system or the Kor Sor Nor Programme have the opportunity to enroll in Mae Sod Technical College, which offers vocational courses in fields like electrical and mechanical engineering, business and accounting, hospitality management, service sector, construction, and more.[12]

Challenges after the Coup and Pandemic

Numerous challenges and barriers are obstructing these children's access to formal higher education systems. The NFPE/NFME pathways which is rooted in Myanmar accredited education system is not reliable anymore due to students' lack of willingness and security threats to go back to Myanmar. Thai formal and informal education systems are not very popular options among the migrant students, especially the refugee children who arrive to Thailand after the coup without any Thai language skills. Currently, the GED system is the only reliable and most popular option among students.

However, the ability to take GED tests is limited up to each students' extent of vulnerability. In order to take a GED test, a student is required to show an ID card to identify citizenship. Before the coup in Myanmar, the displaced children who were studying in MLCs were able to go back to Myanmar to apply for an ID card and passport. And then, they could come back to Thailand to take the GED test, subsequently

applying for universities in Thailand or in abroad. However, the insecurity challenges and conflicts arose in Myanmar after the coup, resulting the students not being able to go back to Myanmar and apply for ID cards.

Accessibility Challenges to Higher Education

The absence of legal documents prevents students from applying to universities, as most institutions require ID cards from applicants. Even if students have passports or citizen ID cards, the lack of entry stamps and legal visas for Thailand restrict their ability to travel to universities in other provinces. This "illegal" status causes constant fear of arrest, limiting their freedom of movement and making it difficult to leave Mae Sot.

The students who seek undergraduate studies are required to travel to university since the bachelor's degree classes need in-person activities. This is the hardest challenge for the undocumented students due to the presence of numerous checkpoints along the way to other provinces. Some students without passports receive admission and scholarships from foreign universities but cannot leave due to their lack of passports, visas, and travel capability, resulting in the forfeiture of awarded scholarships.

Besides, students without any documents face significant hardships in graduating, as universities ask for an ID card for graduation. Additionally, those who manage to travel and enroll at universities encounter financial difficulties. However, international and local organizations offer financial scholarships, loans, and internship programs to help these students overcome their financial burdens.

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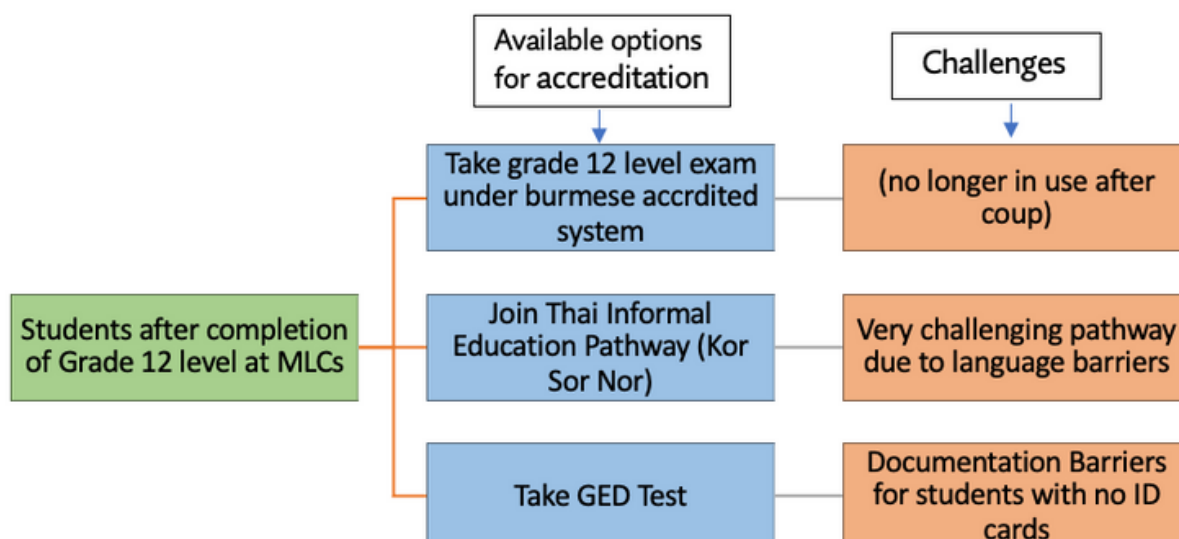
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Accredited Pathway	Type of Programs	Eligibility	Duration	Suitability	Challenges
Myanmar Accredited Pathway	1. NFPE	At least 10 years old Read and write Burmese	2 years (Part-time)	Over-age students who seek for Myanmar Education or wish to go back to Myanmar	- Not functioning after the coup in Myanmar -Students do not wish to go back to Myanmar after coup
	2. NFME	At least 13 years old Must have Grade 4 level certificate	3 years (Part-time)		
	3. MLC Grade 1 to 12 Education System	At least 4-5 years old	12 years (Full-time) (1 year for 1 grade level)	Students who want to go back to Myanmar to attend universities or work	
Thai Accredited Pathway	1. Thai Formal Education System (Thai Public Schools)	At least 4-5 years old	12 Years (Full-time)	Students who want to live in Thailand for study and work	-Lack of Thai language skills -More costly than MLCs
	2. Thai Informal Education Systems (Kor Sor Nor) (กระซอโนร์)	At least 13 years old Entrance Exam (read and write basic Thai language)	6 years (part-time)		
Internationally accredited pathway	GED Program run by MLCs	Mostly after completion of high school level education	Up to students' readiness to take the test	Students who wish to apply to universities in Thailand and foreign countries	Students without ID cards cannot take the test
Vocational Education	Mae Sod Technical College, various NGOs, CSOs	High School Certificates	1-2 years	Youths who seek for employment in Thailand	

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