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Education obstacles and family separation for children of migrant workers in Thailand: a case from Chiang Mai

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**ABSTRACT**

The measured rate of primary school completion in the East Asia and Pacific region has exceeded 100%, but aggregate statistics inadequately reflect the experience of migrants, who are harder to count than sedentary populations. For Thailand several studies have found enrolment rates among migrant children to be very low, but the sparse evidence amid differences in geography and industrial sector means this pattern may not be universal. The present article reports a study which focuses in more depth on a particular migrant community in order to show relevant dynamics with greater specificity and clarity. It finds a higher enrolment rate than in the previous studies of migrants in Thailand, but also shows how many such children fail to complete their primary education through being placed in classes lower than the normal grade for their age. In this community the benefits accrued from school enrolment were therefore limited compared with the costs, resulting in family separations as some children were left in the home country and some entered employment early. In the 15–17 year age range, girls rather than boys were separated from the parental home.

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**Introduction**

**Overview and relevance**

Given the vast scale of migration within the global South, the educational aspects of such migration have received surprisingly little international scholarly attention in the past (Bartlett & Ghaffar-Kucher, 2013, p. 2). The matter has become more salient in recent years, when great progress has been made towards meeting the goal of universal primary education through mass school coverage but problems remain of reaching some especially vulnerable groups (UN, 2015). It is not always easy to identify, understand, and make visible the vulnerable groups in question. Official figures tend to overstate primary education completion rates in a country or region (World Bank, 2016b); the World Bank’s measurement of the primary completion rate for East Asia and the Pacific exceeded 100% for the years from 2009 to 2013 (World Bank, 2016b). At the same time, the statistics do not adequately reflect the presence of migrant children in the population, since many are not legally registered (Huguet, 2014). Scholarly studies are urgently required to balance and supplement the aggregate view. The present article contributes to the growth of a literature which partly fills this gap by examining conditions of educational disadvantage faced by migrant families in the global South (for example, Bartlett & Ghaffar-Kucher, 2013; Hoang & Yeoh, 2015; Nagasaka &
The article also builds on studies of access to education by children more generally in the global South, especially the work produced by Lewin and others under the CREATE (Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity) project between 2007 and 2013 (CREATE, 2018).

In the specific case of education for migrant children in Thailand, a small but persuasive literature already exists on the schooling disadvantages they experience, and the ways in which this deprives many of a primary education (Arphattananon, 2012; Chantavanich, 2007; Dowding, 2014; Punpuing, Kusakabe, Holummyong, Chamchan, & Darawuttimaprakom, 2014; Vungsiriphisal, Ruksollamuang, & Chantavanich, 2013). This literature has been greatly concerned with the apparent consequences of changes in national public policy on migrant education. A sparse collection of sub-national-level case studies has been used primarily to provide illustrations and samples of the overall situation. The distinctive details of different groups of migrant children – and crucially their sociological contexts – have tended to be simplified and downplayed. This collection of cases now needs to be expanded not only in order to give the central narrative more accuracy, but also to recognize differences in the patterns among sub-groups and localities. Not all migrants are the same, nor do they face the same spatial, social, and economic conditions. This point has been made in the context of migrants in Thailand – although not specifically the field of education – by Kusakabe and Pearson (2012) and Rabibhadana and Hayami (2013).

Accordingly, the present study took a largely inductive approach and an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2007) perspective. Rather than beginning from research questions defined to test a theory or to yield generalizations about a large social group, the study started with a particular community of migrant children which could practically be studied in some depth. Using mixed methods it sought to identify phenomena that are significant in view of the reference literature.

The findings partly serve to confirm and strengthen the conclusions of previous research, especially in showing how non-completion of primary education is linked to a lack of school capacities for enabling migrants to adapt to a new language and curriculum of instruction, and a lack of co-ordination in curriculum and accreditation between countries. Going further, the present study shows how non-completion is not necessarily a matter of early drop-out from school, but is linked with the lagging of migrant children behind the expected grade for their age, stemming from their initial class placement in schools. The study also shows how this can lead to the separation of members within migrant worker families, and how these phenomena have a gender dimension.

The findings are significant from the perspectives of human rights of migrant workers and their families, as well as the achievement of a sustainable migrant worker regime across the region of Thailand and its neighbours. Although we have reason to think that the children in this study are in a better educational situation than many other migrant children in Thailand, their access to suitable education is less than that demanded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 28. The study also shows how the education regime combines with other circumstances to deny children the right to be cared for by their parents (Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 16(3); Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 9). A greater realization of these rights would help reduce illegal trafficking and stabilize the importation of the low-cost labour which the Thailand economy needs (Jirattikorn, 2015; Paithoonpong & Chalamwong, 2012).

**Migrant workers, migrant children and their school education in Thailand**

About three million people in Thailand are low-paid migrant workers (including close family dependants) from the neighbouring countries of Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR (Huguet, 2014). This figure is only an approximate informed guess because – despite many registration and verification exercises – the Thai state has failed to create a generally effective framework to
document and administer such migration (Jirattikorn, 2015; Natali, 2013). The failure is functional in that it allows many employers to evade the minimum wage and other labour laws (Harkins, 2014). Some migrant children in Thailand (the number of which is again indeterminate) have joined the workforce, including significant numbers in worst forms of child labour (Sankharat, 2013; United States Department of Labour, 2014).

Most of the migrant workers come from Myanmar, and for several decades the labour outflow from that country has drastically increased due to civil wars. The national government has been fighting a variety of armed groups – many of them based in areas near the Thailand border – often resulting in civilian displacements, economic disruption, and loss of livelihoods (Lee, 2016). Since 2010, moves towards greater democracy and liberalization in Myanmar – and associated peace initiatives – have suggested a prospect of migrant worker return, but as yet there is little concrete sign of this happening (Chantavanich & Vungsiriphisal, 2012; Thet & Pholphirul, 2015). Meanwhile in Thailand, the government’s announced initiatives on migrants often respond to popular perceptions that they bring problems of crime, disease control, drug abuse, and garbage disposal (Jirattikorn, 2015; Promprathankul, 2015, p. 12; Thane, 2014).

Nevertheless, responding to the global “Education for All” agenda, Thailand’s government has put in place some apparently generous regulations for providing education for migrant and stateless children: state schools do not officially charge fees, and schools are not permitted to deny enrolment to a child on the grounds that they lack citizenship or identification documents. Moreover, travel restrictions normally placed on migrants are waived for children who need to move in order to attend school (Chantavanich, 2007; Dowding, 2014). Since 2005 when these regulations were instituted, there would seem to have been increased rates of educational enrolment among migrant children (Petchot, 2014, pp. 314–315; Vungsiriphisal et al., 2013, p. 227). Yet the sparse evidence about what levels such enrolment has reached suggests that by 2014 fewer than half of these children were attending school (Dowding, 2014). One study in the province of Samut Sakhon in 2014 put the enrolment rate at only 11% (Punpuing et al., 2014).

These continuing low enrolment rates are thought to be partly due to the remaining costs for poor migrant families of sending a child to school: costs such as daily transport; extra fees and equipment; and the opportunity costs of forgoing child labour (Arphattananon, 2012, p. 9). Language is also seen as a very significant obstacle (Arphattananon, 2012; Dowding, 2014; Vungsiriphisal et al., 2013, p. 228). Arphattananon’s (2012) research in Ranong and Pattani Provinces in the south of Thailand found that primary schools would not admit students whose proficiency in Thai language was low. As a result, many migrant children seeking to enter the official school system first needed to attend migrant learning centres (MLCs) run by non-governmental organizations. This meant that in primary school, migrant children tended to be older than the other students in the class. Those who were considerably above the normal age for their grade would often drop out from school. Those who stayed in the system had to endure a curriculum which – despite some “local curriculum” flexibility – had a core based on a centralizing nationalist Thai culture (Arphattananon, 2012).

The failure to ensure that migrant children get a fair school education is sometimes attributed to poor implementation of an increasingly enlightened government policy (Arphattananon, 2012, p. 6; Vungsiriphisal et al., 2013, pp. 219–220). Arphattananon (2012, p. 5) found government officials withholding information from migrants about their education rights on the grounds that otherwise more of these foreigners would enter the country and public opinion would not accept this. At the same time, the best schools are often reluctant to admit migrants, fearing that to do so would drag down their academic performance and reputation. Government capitation grants to schools fail to take account of the extra resources they would presumably need in order to help migrant students adapt, notably for acquiring Thai language and for learning through other languages meanwhile. Neither does the Thai government significantly fund MLCs to help perform these tasks (Dowding, 2014). Furthermore, migrant students have difficulty transferring between schools in Myanmar and Thailand because of differences in curriculum structure and a lack of mutually-recognized education certificates (Dowding, 2014). Although Thailand’s Ministry of Education has recognized this
problem (Yamwagee, 2015b), discussions to resolve it have not produced a solution. At least one inter-ministry meeting of the Thailand government was held in 2015 (Yamwagee, 2015b), and a consultation meeting was organized by concerned Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and UN agencies with representatives of the Thailand and Myanmar governments in December 2015 (UNESCO Bangkok, 2015). But in the following year the Government of Thailand was more concerned to reduce the numbers of migrant workers’ children in the country (Bangkok Post, 2016): a priority which did not fit well with making it easier for migrants to use Thai schools.

Freer movement of migrants with their families might have been expected to become a policy goal following the inauguration of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, which promised a “highly integrated” economy by 2025 (ASEAN, 2015, p. 15). However, the details of the AEC’s 2015 vision and blueprint document ignore the specific educational challenges of unskilled labour migration (ASEAN, 2015). The Thailand government at this time conceived a plan to make Thailand an ASEAN “education hub” (Thailand Government Public Relations Department, 2015, p. 1; Yamwagee, 2015a). An objective was “to prepare schools for teaching Thai and foreign students from ASEAN countries” (Yamwagee, 2015a, p. 1) but the initiative was focused on a limited number of secondary schools. This would seem to serve and foster a regional educational elite rather than meet the needs of migrant workers’ children.

Research approach and process

Theoretical framework and research strategy

The research – carried out under a project entitled “Invisible rights: Education of Shan Migrant Children in Thai schools, Chiang Mai Province” – aimed to increase understandings of the educational needs and conditions of a group of migrant children in Thailand. The author lacked resources to construct a practical sample frame that could be taken as representative of all such children. At the same time, we recognized the key premise of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2007), that broad social categories often fail to capture the dynamics of difference and disadvantage, and that many important conditions are characteristic of specific combinations of attributes. The study therefore used a largely inductive approach and an intersectional perspective. The study’s approach was largely inductive in that, rather than seeking to answer an overall prior question or test a particular hypothesis, it began from a concrete case which could practically be studied – a particular community of migrant workers and children – and looked in a more open-ended way for phenomena significantly related to the reference literature indicated above. By paying detailed attention to the social and economic background of a particular community, the research aimed for new insights into processes underlying educational outcomes. The study used an intersectional approach in that it was concerned not with a single social category (such as migrants) but sensitive to combinations of different categories (migrant households of various attributes, children within them as girls and boys, and members of different age-groups).

In order to apply this approach, the research process had two main phases. At the heart of Phase One was a set of interviews, a questionnaire being administered in all the camp households. After the preliminary data had been collected in this way, the data were reviewed in order to identify potential findings which merited being investigated more closely in Phase Two. The criteria here were, firstly, that the potential finding in question had a bearing on understanding conditions of migrant children in education; secondly, that it was broadly significant (i.e., similar to things occurring or likely to occur in some other migrant locations in Thailand and internationally); and, thirdly, that our observations here could add something worthwhile to the comparative literature. Having identified several potential findings of this kind at the end of Phase One, we attempted to consolidate our understanding of them in Phase Two by conducting further semi-structured interviewing on those particular topics. Further details are given below.
Determining the case study boundary

The studied group was chosen from within the Chiang Mai municipal area, as this was where the author lived. Chiang Mai is the largest city in Northern Thailand. The 2010 national census put the population of the municipal area at about 950,000 (NSO/MICT, 2011), but it has been growing rapidly. Due to its location and status as the northern metropole, Chiang Mai has long been a point of trans-border contact especially with people of the Shan ethnic group (also known as Tai Yay), which is mostly based in Myanmar but straddles the border. Most of the city’s migrant workers belong to this ethnic group. This is different from more southerly parts of Thailand which attract migrants of other Myanmar ethnicities: principally Bamar (Burmese), Mon, and Kayin (Karen) (IOM Thailand, & The Asian Research Center for Migration, 2013), who for the most part are linguistically and culturally more remote from the centralized Thai identity.

The author gained facilitated access to a Shan migrant worker community through an organized group of Shan youth. The Shan youth group had links with migrant worker sub-communities throughout the city. Many of the migrant workers live in camps, which are patches of land where their employers provide them with basic access to water, sanitation, electricity, and materials for making shelters. But the Shan youth group told us they believed some of the employers would oppose a substantial research project in their camps. In September 2014 we identified four camps where it was considered that such research would be feasible, and conducted a household mapping in them. Eventually, in view of limitations on resources, we decided to focus on the largest of these camps, situated in San Kamphaeng Sub-district.

The land for the camp had been provided by a property development company which was maintaining a housing estate and building new houses in it, and hence required convenient low-cost labour for construction and related manual work. Both the nature of the industrial sector and the urban location are likely to significantly differentiate the conditions of our studied group from those of many other migrant workers in Thailand.

Interview and consent procedure

At the time of the field research, the author’s institution lacked a mandatory procedure or a suitable facility for overseeing research ethics and consent process. The author nevertheless endeavoured to apply good practices, as described below.

To start the field research, the Shan youth group helped identify senior members of the camp community, and a community meeting was organized (attended by a majority of the camp population) in which the author and research assistants explained the research intentions and process, in order to gain general consent and ascertain conditions in which to go ahead. Subsequently the same explanation and a similar consent request was made to the senior member in each of the households in the camp at the time of the household interview, and to other interviewees in Phase Two. In each case the prospective interviewee was told that the purpose of the research was to learn what special problems affected the education of migrant children, taking into account their family circumstances. It was made clear that individuals and households would be anonymous in reporting of the data and that they were free to decline to be interviewed. However, in all households we received verbal consent for an interview, and the respondents freely contributed their time for the interviews without being offered or given material compensation.

After testing and revising the questionnaire (it needed to be shortened), we administered it in all the households of the camp. Interviews could only take place between about 6.30pm and 8.00pm most evenings, when senior household members were likely to be at home and available to talk. Hence one interviewing team could typically conduct two household interviews – each of 30–45 minutes – in an evening. The holding of an interview in a household on any occasion depended on the availability of an adult member willing to be the prime respondent on behalf of the household. In each case this individual provided information about all the members of the
household. Other household members were often present and often intervened with information, but their information was only recorded when it was accepted by the prime respondent. We conducted questionnaire interviews in 72 households, representing 246 residents. At times we had three interviewing teams working in parallel. Nevertheless, it took about three months (from October 2014 to January 2015) to complete these interviews. It was virtually a universal sample of the camp households (only “virtually”, because a small number of individuals and households moved in and out of the camp during the survey period).

In each household, the holding of an interview at any given time depended on an adult being present as the main respondent. The interviews were conducted in Thai. Often the senior respondent’s knowledge of Thai language was limited, but we generally found it possible to communicate with the assistance of junior household members, or other young volunteers from the community. We do not believe that the language barrier or the varying forms of translation introduced significant bias.

The questionnaire was mostly composed of objective questions with short answers, covering major aspects of the household’s basic demographic composition, income, and migration chronology; the occupations of adults; the educational status of each child and the chronology of their school enrolments. The interviewers were instructed to note qualitative explanations given by the interviewees of the objective questions, along with other remarks. Additionally, the questionnaire included two more subjective, open-ended questions, namely “What is the cost to the family of the children’s schooling?” and “What are the benefits you hope will come from the children’s schooling?”.

In Phase Two we sought to consolidate and extend our Phase One findings, through interviews with school staff. Having learned the particular schools where most of the camp’s children were enrolled, we visited the five most used schools, and in each one interviewed the director of the school and (separately) another staff member whom we asked the director to nominate as a teacher who had worked with migrant children. These interviews were semi-structured and used a similar consent procedure as in the household survey.

For both Phase One and Phase Two, the responses to the qualitative questions were noted by the interviewers and reviewed by the author at the analysis stage, but without using a formal tool for coding and quantifying popular types of answer.

**Findings and discussions**

**Socio-demographic situation and features of the studied group**

From our observations, the dwellings in the camp were constructed from bamboo poles, metal sheeting, reed matting, and miscellaneous pieces of timber and masonry. Most of these homes were attached to the electricity grid. Piped water and toilet facilities were available at various locations in the camp. The camp had been established eight years previously and some of its members were original residents from that time, but during the research we noticed some households decamping and others taking their place. A wholesale relocation – and partial dispersal – of our studied group occurred in late 2015, between the first and second phases of our study, apparently due to the changing needs of the employer as its property development projects progressed. We estimate that at any one time there are dozens of camps of this nature in the urban area of Chiang Mai.

The household survey found that of the 155 adults living in the camp, the sexes and their age distributions were fairly evenly balanced (79 men and 76 women, both sexes having a median age of 30). Almost all the camp residents were of Shan ethnicity. (The 10 others identified as of Wa, Pa’O, and Muslim ethnicities.)

All but 19 (four men and 15 women) of the adults were in paid employment. Of those in employment, the median daily income for men was 280 Baht (about US$ 8.40) and for women was 200 Baht (about US$ 6.00). Only 10 individuals earned more than 399 Baht per day. The highest
Daily income was 1,600 Thai Baht (about US$ 48.00) in the case of a woman who ran her own business cooking and selling food. Details of the income distribution are given in Table 1. Most of the adults in the sample were employed by the same property development company that provided the land and utilities of the camp. Men were typically employed in construction of new buildings and infrastructure in the housing development. Women tended to be assigned to lighter duties around the estate—such as cleaning the roads—and in domestic service. The median wages appeared to be below the legal minimum, but the employer might argue that the value of living accommodation had been deducted. Camp members were reluctant to discuss matters of legal status and rights.

There were 91 children living in the camp (36% of the camp population). Seventy-five of the children (81%) were living in households with two adults. In almost all of these cases it appeared to be a nuclear family arrangement. No children were found living without an adult, and three children (3%) were living with only one adult. Details of household composition by numbers of adults and children are given in Table 2.

**School enrolment, drop-out and age-grade lagging**

In the household survey 79% of all the children were reported to be enrolled in school. For children within the age range of compulsory education (i.e., between the ages of seven and 15 inclusive), the proportion was 94%. These proportions are much higher than those commonly recorded or estimated for migrant children in Thailand (Arphattananon, 2012, pp. 4–5; Dowding, 2014, pp. 15–17). However, in the 7–15 age group, more than half were placed in a class lower than the normal grade level for their age. Age-grade lagging was particularly marked among the older children. Among the 12 children aged 15–17, only two were within a year of the appropriate school grade for their age. Age-grade lagging was particularly marked among the older children. Among the 12 children aged 15–17, only two were within a year of the appropriate school grade for their age. Five had left school, and another five were so far behind that it seemed unlikely they would finish their primary education (a 16-year-old and a 17-year-old still in kindergarten, two 15-year-olds at the fourth grade of primary school, and a 16-year-old at the fifth grade). Not one of the children in the sample had reached Grade 10 (the first grade of Upper Secondary School). See Table 3 for the detailed data.

### Table 1. Daily income of surveyed people aged 16 and above, by gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily income bracket (Thai Baht)</th>
<th>Female adult</th>
<th>Male adult</th>
<th>Female aged 16–17</th>
<th>Male aged 16–17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not currently in paid employment</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140–199</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200–299</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300–399</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400–599</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600–1000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>76</strong></td>
<td><strong>79</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Composition of surveyed households by number of adults and children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of adults in the household</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Number of adults</th>
<th>Number of people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>246</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Looking for differences in enrolment by gender, we found none significant among children aged 14 and below. But remarkably in the 15–17 age group, only one of the 12 was female.

We further investigated these numerical findings through the school staff interviews in Phase Two of the research. Regarding the high overall enrolment rate, staff in the schools where most of these children were enrolled tended to confirm that the schools were keen to accept migrant children. Several explained or agreed that without migrant children the economic viability of these schools would be threatened. In the two schools attended by most of the migrants in our sample, over half the students were migrants. School staff reported that in recent decades in Chiang Mai, as the transport infrastructure has improved and many people have become more affluent, a greater proportion of non-migrant children have been enrolled in private schools instead of state ones, leaving spare capacity in many state schools. The schools attended by the children in our study were mostly within seven kilometres of the camp, and the routes were served by frequent commercial public transport.

Nevertheless, the financial costs of schooling for a migrant family were high in comparison with its income. Going by figures provided in some of the responses to the Phase One survey, we estimate the annual schooling cost of a child (ignoring possible opportunity costs of putting a child to work, or likely cheaper living costs if the child stayed in Myanmar) varied between about USD 350 and USD 900, depending largely on the educational level (see a more detailed breakdown of this estimate in Table 4). Thus, given that the average annual income for an adult in the camp (as reported to our survey interviewers and summarized in Table 1) was about USD 2,000, the burden of family expense for children’s education was very substantial. Further, bearing in mind that the proportion of children in the camp population – about one third – was significantly higher than the 11% estimated among all migrants in Thailand (Dowding, 2014, p. 15; UNICEF, 2014, p. 48), it appeared that, for most of the families with children in our sample, the education of the children in Thai schools was not incidental to their livelihood strategy but a central part of it.

This educational spending by the migrant families in Thailand was treated by them as a long-term investment. Asked about the benefits of schooling, household heads interviewed in the Phase One survey often said that a migrant with several years of Thai primary education in the city had

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**Table 3. School grade-level enrolment by age among the surveyed children.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pre-K</th>
<th>K1</th>
<th>K2</th>
<th>K3</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>P6</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>S5</th>
<th>S6</th>
<th>Not known</th>
<th>Not in school</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>2</td>
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**Notes:**

K indicates Kindergarten-level education
P indicates primary (prathayom) school level
S indicates secondary (mattayom) school level
The shaded cells indicate the normal education level for a child of the given age in Thailand.
realistic hopes of obtaining better work than would have been possible without the schooling. Occupations mentioned as attainable targets included gasoline pump attendant, security guard, domestic cleaner, and nanny. Evidently, employment begins to be an attractive option for a migrant child from the age of 15 or 16. To continue longer in school after that age is not likely to lead to a better career in the face of legal obstacles to higher-status employment of migrants in Thailand, and the lack of credit for Thai education in Myanmar. The lack of girls living in the camp between the ages of 15 and 17 may be partly explained by the fact that the female-gendered jobs in the list—domestic cleaner and nanny—typically involve living at the home of the employer. In this age-range significantly more boys than girls remain living in the camp. A benefit of schooling mentioned several times in the household interviews was that a child could be “safe” in school, since school enrolment gives a child a temporary right of residence in Thailand.

Having noticed the frequent age-grade lag in our initial data, we sought to investigate further. For each school-age child we calculated the number of years their age differed from the normal age for the school grade in which they were placed. We then compared this, firstly, with the income per person in their household, and, secondly, with the number of years the household head had lived in Thailand. We saw no clear link. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between males and females in the 7–14 age-group.

Through our Phase Two interviews with school staff, we were able quickly to discount the idea that migrant students fall behind gradually. The national education regulations do not allow grade repetition in primary and secondary school. Teachers attested that the migrant students were typically more attentive and motivated than their Thai classmates, excelling notably in English and Mathematics (subjects relatively free of Thai cultural bias). However, it was true that these students were often older than their Thai peers. The age-lag stemmed from their grade placement on entry to the school. The placement does not recognize any schooling the child may previously have had in Myanmar. Children who have completed a school grade at another recognized school in Thailand can be admitted to the next grade. But a child who has previously lived in a rural area of Thailand will usually have already fallen behind because of difficulties of school access in such areas. For children who have not previously completed a grade in the Thai system, the key criterion in placement is proficiency in Thai language. If their Thai is good, they will be placed in Grade 1 of primary school, regardless of their age. But if they are weak in the Thai language, they will be referred to a public Kindergarten. Exceptions are sometimes made when the child is above 10 years old; in that case, they may be allowed to enter Primary 1 even if they are weak in Thai. In practice, if a child has not been living in Chiang Mai since an early age—and attended kindergarten here—they will be less fluent in Thai and are likely to be above the normal grade-age when they enter primary school, and never catch up. School staff also reported that migrant children would

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expense item</th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th>P1–P4</th>
<th>P5–P6</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pocket money(^a)</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>572</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport to and from school</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>137</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special clothing(^b)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>School top-up fee(^c)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>157</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>358</strong></td>
<td><strong>501</strong></td>
<td><strong>644</strong></td>
<td><strong>908</strong></td>
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Notes:
\(^a\)Pocket money covers small and frequent expenses of the student, such as stationery items and access to the internet in shops when doing homework.
\(^b\)Although the state pays for the main school uniform, students sometimes need extra clothing items in order to participate fully: for example, sports clothes and festive event clothing.
\(^c\)As in most state schools in Thailand, the ones attended by the children in our study imposed a top-up fee entitled “cost of extra learning materials”. School staff said this covered electricity and water supply as well as some other items such as internet connection.
Source: data provided by Phase One survey respondents.
often cease attending without explanation, but they had no means or mandate to investigate the matter further, or to monitor the drop-out rate for migrants.

The importance of getting a sound start in the Thai education system is well illustrated by a narrative told by parents and noted by our interviewer while probing educational chronologies in a household during the Phase One survey. A pair of siblings arrived in Chiang Mai from Myanmar when the brother was nine and the sister six years old. Having very little Thai language, neither could immediately be enrolled in Grade 1 of primary school, but both found a place in the kindergarten at a local temple. The boy was put in a class of children mostly much younger than himself, which he disliked. He began picking up a little Thai language, but only enough to be promoted within the kindergarten at the end of his first year. The girl, on the other hand, took to her education with enthusiasm, and was promptly transferred to a primary school. At the time of our interviews she was 12 and had reached Grade 6. Her brother, at 15, had only reached Grade 4, and would shortly leave school to seek work. Several of the parents in our study expressed the hope that their children would progress deep into secondary and even higher education. This shows their aspirations, but the current reality is that only a few children even begin on this path; they are deterred by the economic factors described earlier.

Children not in the camp: family separation

In retrospect, we realized that our initial questionnaire had been flawed in counting only the residents of the camp. It would have been very useful to have asked about the close family members – especially children – who were no longer in the camp or who had never been brought there. Interviewers realized during the Phase One interviewing that some family children were not present. Separation from children has been documented among Myanmar migrant workers elsewhere in Thailand (e.g., Pearson & Kusakabe, 2012, pp. 114–125). Such separation is conditioned by many factors, including: availability of grandparents or other extended family caregivers in the home of origin; the degree of difficulty to travel and communicate with the home of origin; the safety of both that home area and the current living place, and their comparative suitability as places for children. But our interviewees made clear that education facilities were a crucial part of the equation through the child’s history. A child who has fallen behind at school in Thailand is more likely to be sent back to Shan state. Children were also said to be less likely to be brought to Chiang Mai if they cannot make good use of school attendance there, whether because of having previously fallen behind in the Thai education system, or not having been introduced to it at a young age. This attestation fits with the dual observation of surprisingly high enrolment rate among children in the camp, alongside the large financial burden of schooling.

Conclusion

This study aligns with work by previous researchers in finding that migrant children in Thailand are often excluded or held back in their education despite the superficial appearance that national policy provides them with free entry to schools (Arphattananon, 2012; Dowding, 2014). The present study has distinctively clarified a dynamic of age-grade lagging which plays a role in preventing some migrant children from completing primary education. A substantial proportion of the children in the study were over-aged for their class grade. This was found to stem from the admission and placement procedures when migrant children sought entry to primary school. There was no mechanism for recognizing any previous education in Myanmar; placement was based largely on the child’s existing Thai language proficiency, and little provision was made for assisting children to gain that proficiency. In this, the study shows how migrants can be particularly vulnerable to what Lewin and others have documented elsewhere as “silent exclusion” (Lewin & Little, 2011, p. 335). The present case notably shows a difference by gender in children above the age of 15 in which migrant girls appear more likely than boys to leave the home in order to take up employment. School-leaving before Grade 10 here
occurs despite a very strong financial commitment to education on the part of the studied families. These findings suggest that despite Thailand’s affirmation of “Education for All” principles, its migrant education and labour policies still constitute a blockage to the fulfilling the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal of universal secondary education.

Another important finding of the study is that for some children these educational obstacles mean being exposed to pressures to leave their parents’ home, and conversely that a smoother education career for a child could enable such families to stay together. Internationally it is well known that labour migration frequently involves separating children from their parents and siblings (see for example Antman, 2012; Chang, Dong, & MacPhail, 2011; Cortes, 2015) and that children and their pathways are often active elements – not just residual problems – in the strategic choices made by the family (Orellana, Thorne, Chee, & Lam, 2001). The present article helps relate that to the issue of educational access.

Since the research reported here relates to a very particular migrant community, the author acknowledges that the extent to which the findings apply among other migrants is not fully determinate. As argued earlier, the community studied here may very well be in a more favourable situation than that of most other migrants in Thailand. However, by documenting and explaining a number of dynamics in this concrete situation, the article supports and extends findings of other studies, and provides new insights: a useful basis for further studies. It shows how such a relatively inductive and intersectional approach – seeking to understand multiple differences within a group rather than to generalize – can be useful for the task of extending educational rights to the most vulnerable.

Note

1. The World Bank estimates that in 2013, there were more than 93 million South–South migrants; a greater number than of South–North migrants (World Bank, 2016a, p. 12).

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Disclosure statement

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