# Transcultural Lives of Myanmar Migrant Youths in Thailand: Language Acquisition, Self-perceived Integration, and Sense of Belonging

## Research Note

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## Abstract

Globalisation and international mobility have led people to settle in vastly different cultural contexts. Transnationally situated migrant families are becoming a more regular feature of children's and youths' lives in today's world. Thailand, one of four major economies in Southeast Asia, hosts over half of the region's migrant workers. In 2018, there were three million migrants living in Thailand and an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 of those were children and youths. It has been noted that migration experiences constitute substantial interferences in children's and youths' development and well-being, given the environmental and cultural changes they are exposed to. However, despite this trend, very few studies focus on the children of migrant workers. Language and language acquisition are central issues in debates about transculturation, cultural identity in transnational migration, as well as integration in host countries. Based on qualitative research with Myanmar migrant workers' children, aged between 12 and 18, in two Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) in Ranong province in southern Thailand, this study contributes to current debates on transnational family migration by arguing for the centrality of language acquisition in the everyday lives of young migrants and their self-perceived integration into the host society.

Keywords: Thailand, migration, children of migrant workers, integration, language acquisition, sense of belonging

## Introduction

Thailand is the fourth largest economy in Southeast Asia. In recent decades, the country has transitioned from being a net-sending to a net-receiving nation for labour migration (Huguet / Punpuing 2005). A massive influx of low-skilled

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workers from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Vietnam into Thailand began during the 1990s (United Nations 2019). Inconsistent economic growth, social inequalities and marginalisation as well as political instability are major factors forcing people from neighbouring countries to seek work and a better life in Thailand (Gerard / Bal 2020). Given Thailand's increasingly ageing population, low unemployment rates and continuing economic growth, its demand for migrant workers has been constantly rising in recent decades (Sasiwongsaroj / Burasit 2019). Moreover, due to rapidly increasing education levels, younger Thais have been gradually turning away from the so-called 3D (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) jobs, which are increasingly being filled by low-skilled labour migrants from Thailand's neighbouring countries (Lathapipat 2011). According to the Foreign Workers Administration Office (FWAO), the number of migrant workers in Thailand increased from 632,068 in 2001 to over three million in 2019 (FWAO 2020). Among foreign workers in Thailand, migrant workers from Myanmar represent the largest proportion (67%), followed by Cambodians (23%) and Laotians (10%) (ibid.). These migration dynamics are contributing to a demographic transformation, as not only migrant workers themselves are coming to Thailand, but also their children, who either accompany them or are born in Thailand. The exact number of migrant workers' children is difficult to calculate, as large numbers of them are undocumented. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that there were between 300,000 and 400,000 migrant workers' children in Thailand in 2018 (UN 2019: 99). The World Vision Foundation of Thailand (WVFT) estimates that around 60,000 babies are born to migrant workers in Thailand every year (Chanwanpen 2018).

Despite these trends, the integration of migrant workers into Thai society has never been addressed as a policy issue by the Government of Thailand. Over the past three decades, the management of work migration has mainly been framed around national security concerns that permitted migrants to reside and work in Thailand on a temporary basis only (Hall 2011). With labour shortages and global market trends becoming increasingly evident, the Thai state has begun to realise that the demand for migrant workers can no longer be framed as just a short-term replacement for local labour demands. Yet, provisions concerning permanent residency and citizenship acquisition for migrant workers have largely been left unaddressed by policy makers. In addition, despite the significant large and growing second generation of migrant workers in Thai society, only in 2005 and 2008, respectively, did the Thai government provide regulations that allowed for education (Ministry of Education 2005) and birth registration of migrant children (Royal Thai Government Gazette 2008). Krongkwan Traitongyoo (2008) argued that "Thainess" – the officially propagated "trinity of nation, religion, and monarchy" (p. 221) to forge a national

(ethnic) Thai identity – plays an important role in dealing with different groups of migrant worker populations. In her work, Traitongyoo reflects upon the relationship between the construction of Thainess around language, religion and citizenship and the related immigration policies; the policy decisions regarding the inclusion and exclusion of migrant populations; and the ethnic relations within Thai society. It appears that the Thai state deliberately prevents migrant workers from either permanently residing in the country or integrating into Thai society and becoming citizens, as they represent the constitutive Other to the state-promoted idea of Thainess. In her study on the perception of Myanmar migrant workers in Samut Sakhon Province, Puttaporn Areeprachakun (2020: 153) concludes that "migrant workers from Myanmar are continuously discussed as Other or dangerous aliens who are a source of problems in Thailand, not because they are creating problems but because of the ways the state actors view and manage them". Yet, as Draper et al. (2019), among others, have shown, these othering processes not only concern migrant populations but are also part of the everyday experiences of non-Thai-speaking citizens in Thailand. Moreover, although the Thai government advertises and insists on pursuing an "Education for All" (EFA) policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017), there is no official reliable data on the proportion of migrant workers' children enrolled in public schools, nor on their schooling outcomes (Nawarat 2019). In 2014, a study commissioned by the NGOs Save the Children in Thailand and World Education Thailand (2014) among migrant workers communities found that an estimated 60 per cent of migrant workers' children were not enrolled in public schools (p. 15).

The research on which this paper is based aims at contributing to the understanding of how Thai language proficiency among Myanmar migrant workers' children enrolled in the secondary education level – aged between 12 and 18 – affects their self-perceived integration into Thai society and their sense of belonging to their and/or their parents' place of origin in Myanmar and to their current home / residence in Thailand. As the research project is still ongoing, this papers intends to, firstly, outline and reflect upon the process of the first field research period and, secondly, discuss its preliminary findings. The authors conducted a qualitative case study among Myanmar migrant workers' children in two privately run Migrant Learning Centres (MLC) in Mueang district in the province of Ranong in Southern Thailand. The province hosts the highest proportion of (mainly Myanmar) migrant workers in relation to the native Thai population compared with other provinces in Thailand (Tuangratananon et al. 2019). Preliminary findings indicate a strong relationship between Thai language proficiency and the self-perceived integration of the interviewees into Thai society. However, the research also showed that the extent to which the interviewees felt integrated into Thai society also depended on their individual migration histories, the frequency of visits to Myanmar, the intensity of contact

with friends and family members in Myanmar and in Thailand as well as the educational institution they were attending in Ranong.

## Language acquisition and sense of belonging

International migration intensifies the connections between different peoples, cultures and spaces (Jess / Massey 1995). Interactions with different cultures and different languages of the host country as well as transnational practices occur and impact the daily lives of migrants (Voigt-Graf 2005, Morales 2016). This poses immense challenges for migrant children to adapt to the new social milieu and physical environment. The ability to use the host country's main language is recognised as a crucial factor in the well-being of immigrants (Hernandez et al. 2007, Toppelberg / Collins 2010). It is also a predictor of social competence and educational achievements (Farmer 1997). Most research on language proficiency among immigrants builds on the human capital theory. Here, language skills are recognised as human capital for migrants in terms of increasing job opportunities and facilitating social and political participation (Chiswick 2008, Isphording 2015).

Language proficiency is widely accepted as a key driver of immigrants' integration. Thus, the learning of the national language has become a cornerstone of integration policies in many countries across Europe (Nusche et al. 2009, Siarova / Essomba 2014). Cristina Ros i Solé (2013) showed that knowledge of the host language is seen as a barometer of migrants' integration and is a part of so-called "knowledge of society", which is compulsory for entering, settling or applying for citizenship. However, the term "integration" is difficult to define and deliberately left open because the particular requirements for acceptance by a receiving society vary greatly from country to country. It is frequently linked to other complex terms such as cohesion, sense of belonging and citizenship, and the responsibility for integration is borne by many actors, not only migrants but also other agencies, such as local communities, the host government, institutions, and so on (Penninx 2004).

However, migrants generally maintain close links with their places of origin and establish local networks at their places of destination, which leads to the creation of diasporas as well as translocal spaces (Greiner / Sakdapolrak 2013) with multiple linguistic allegiances and perceptions of belonging that are no longer identified purely with territory (Valentine et al. 2008). Sense of belonging is understood here as "an individual's sense of identification or positioning in relation to a group" (Tovar et al. 2010: 200) as well as to certain spaces and places (Raffaetà / Duff 2013). Language is claimed as central in order to maintain transnational relations in transnational migration (Rumbaut 2002) – particularly

as digital communication has become cheaper and more accessible, facilitating migrant ties to the homeland – as well as to "form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments" (Baumeister / Leary 1995: 522) and relations in host countries.

In this context, several studies have found that migrant children enter a state of "bifocality" which subjects them to the contrasting demands for linguistic assimilation between the host country and their (ethnic) community (Fassetta 2014, Phinney et al. 2001, Rouse 1992). A study of Polish migrant children in Scotland showed for example that the children spoke their own language and English in different spatial contexts (Polish at home, English at school). The intersection of the cultural frames they interact with can lead them to perceive themselves as being Scottish or British at school and Polish at home, and this affects their sense of belonging accordingly (Moskal / Sime 2016). Similarly, second generation migrants from India in Canada expressed a "dual consciousness". The construction of their identities referred strongly to both countries. They felt Indian yet also Canadian, and they retained a sense of loyalty to both India and Canada (Somerville 2008).

These studies exemplify the complex and often contradictory social dynamics second generation migrants are confronted with when navigating their lives within and between different socio-linguistic fields. Giving the children of migrant workers the educational opportunities to learn the language of the host country is one thing, accepting their mother tongue as valuable and promoting its use is another. As Moskal and Sime (2016: 45) have pointed out: "the task of maintaining children's home language too often falls to the families. Schools need better mechanisms to promote home languages in meaningful ways, and to include them in the curriculum."

## Research sites

With around 193,000 inhabitants, Ranong Province on Thailand's southwest coast is the country's second smallest province. It shares a 169-kilometer land border and an approximately 90-kilometer maritime border with Myanmar. Mueang district was selected as the study area because it has the highest density of migrants in the province. Although fisheries and the fishing industry are dominant in Mueang district, all kinds of businesses that employ migrant workers can be found in this area, including construction, agriculture, factories, services and domestic work. According to a report by the FWAO in August 2019, there were 32,504 registered migrant workers in Ranong. The number of migrant children in Ranong was estimated by the Thai Health Promotion Foundation at about 7,670 in 2016 (MGR Online 2017).

As shown in Table 1, the majority of migrant workers' children in Ranong do not attend Thai public education institutions, but are enrolled in privately run Migrant Learning Centres (MLC) that have a very limited capacity for teaching Thai language and mostly follow the official primary and part of the secondary school curriculum of Myanmar (Tuangratananon et al. 2019). Most MLCs are privately funded through tuition fees and receive partial subsidies by the Government of Myanmar. In many cases, they only offer classes until the eighth grade.[1] In order to receive a Myanmar high school degree, students have to continue their studies until the tenth grade in Myanmar. Thus, children and youths studying in these learning centres either drop out of school after grade eight or leave for Myanmar to finish their secondary school degree.

Table 1: Myanmar children enrolled in different types of schools in Ranong in 2018 according to age level

| | 3 years kindergarten | 4–6 years pre-school | 6–11 years primary school | 12–14 years secondary school | total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **municipality** | 52 | 3 | 11 | 9 | 75 |
| **governmental school** primary level | / | 336 | 776 | 31 | 1,143 |
| **private school** | / | 20 | 34 | / | 54 |
| **governmental school** secondary level | / | / | / | 26 | 26 |
| **Migrant Learning Centre** Thai-Myanmar | 162 | 710 | 1,707 | 236 | 2,815 |
| **total** | 214 | 1,069 | 2,528 | 302 | 4,113 |

Source: Sasiwongsaroj /Arphattananon 2018: 8. Data compiled from Ranong Office of Educational Service Area, the Secondary Educational Service Area Office 14, Ranong Provincial Education Office, the Office of Non-Formal Education (ONFE) Ranong Province, Special Education Office Ranong Province, and Department of Local Administration, Ranong Province.

The study was conducted from 1 to 14 August 2019, in two MLCs with distinct features with regard to the curriculum taught as well as the quality and extent of language education. The first learning centre is funded by the Marist Asia Foundation and run by the Marist Mission[2] in Ranong (Marist Asia Foundation 2020). It offers primary and secondary education to around 200 Myanmar students. Additionally, the learning centre offers a two-year international diploma degree in cooperation with the Australian Catholic University (ACU)

1    Interview with a female teacher from Myanmar at Wattana Learning Center, Mueang district, 9 August 2019.
2    The Society of Mary (Marists) is an international Roman Catholic religious congregation, founded in 1816.

in a combination of in-class and online teaching. The primary education curriculum has been accredited by the Thai Ministry of Education (TME). At the time of the research, the school administration had been in the accreditation process with the TME for its secondary education curriculum. As opposed to other MLCs, the Marist Asia Foundation Learning Centre focuses on trilingual education. The primary teaching language is Burmese (Bama), the national language of Myanmar (Aye / Sercombe 2014). Additionally, students undergo language training in Thai and English languages for at least one hour per schooling day. The teaching staff is comprised of Thai nationals, international (mainly Australian) volunteer teachers as well as teachers from Myanmar. The school itself is housed in a two-story building with separate classrooms for every class, comprised of 15 to 25 students.[3]

The second MLC where research was conducted is the Wattana Learning Centre. It is situated in an area of Mueang district that is mainly inhabited by migrant worker families from Myanmar. The school differs fundamentally from the Marist MLC in terms of equipment, curricular foci and learning conditions. The MLC is housed in a ground-level building with no separate classrooms where approximately 100 students are taught simultaneously in small groups from grade one to grade eight in one school room. When the authors first visited the MLC, they were struck by the enormous volume of noise in the approximately 150 square-meter space. The teaching follows the official Myanmar curriculum for primary and secondary education but does not offer a secondary school leaving certificate. Students must either leave school at grade eight or attend the last two years of secondary education and finish their qualifications in Myanmar. With the exception of one native Thai language teacher, the teaching staff at the MLC are exclusively from Myanmar and teach in Burmese only. Thai language classes are only offered for one hour per week. Although the school had received some institutional funding from the Thai and Myanmar governments in the past, at the time of the research, the MLC depended solely on the very low school fees paid by the students' families.[4]

## Methodological approach and research process

Given the scarce and anecdotal evidence that exists on the interplay of language acquisition and sense of belonging as well as self-perceived integration of Myanmar migrant workers' children in Thailand, this research followed an explorative qualitative research approach that employed narrative guideline-based interviews. The interview guideline was structured along the following

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3    Interview with the head of administration of the Marist Asia Foundation Learning Centre, Mueang district, 2 August 2020.
4    Interview with a female teacher from Myanmar at Wattana Learning Center, Mueang district, 9 August 2019.

topics: a) registration status (birth certificate, local residence permit); b) family background (occupations of parents, time of arrival of parents in Thailand); c) migration history (born in Myanmar or Thailand, duration of stay in Thailand); d) transcultural experiences (role of language in everyday relations/interactions with Thai nationals); e) translocal relations (financial remittances sent to Myanmar, frequency of visits to Myanmar and by relatives from Myanmar); f) sense of belonging; and g) coexistence with Thai nationals (frequency and quality of contact with Thai nationals, discrimination experiences).

The researchers collaborated with two female community-based interpreters (CBI) in their early twenties who translated English/Burmese and Burmese/English, as all interviewees preferred to be interviewed in their native language, Burmese. Both interpreters are alumni of the above-mentioned international diploma programme of the Marist MLC, are fluent in Burmese, Thai and English, and are children of migrant workers from Myanmar. Although they were non-professional interpreters, they had gained a lot of experience in interpretation for a number of research projects relating to migrant workers. Research has shown that the need for translation might impact the accuracy of the collected data as the translators might be selective in their interpretation in the sense that they might fail to translate certain (sensitive) issues or give other (more comforting or less sensitive) issues higher priority (see e.g., Jacobson / Landau 2003). The authors attempted to address that limitation by engaging the CBIs in continuous reflections on the interview results and in discussions of their observations and perceptions of the interviewees throughout the research process.

Due to their social embeddedness in the local migrant community and their resultant local knowledge, both CBIs vitally contributed to obtaining access to the research participants as well as to the contextualisation and interpretation of information that the latter provided (see also Boyd 2019). It needs to be emphasised that the collaboration with CBIs is not a methodology as such, but an orientation that aims to even out "the unequal power dynamics that have defined traditional research practices" (ibid.: 103). However, although we actively involved both CBIs in reflections on the research process, it must be noted here that they identified themselves mainly as interpreters and did not pro-actively engage in structuring the research process. Both CBIs requested to remain anonymous as they considered several issues that were discussed during the interviews – such as discrimination experiences – to be highly sensitive. Both CBIs assessed their political agency (Lazar / Nuijten 2013) in Thailand as highly limited and saw assimilation – e.g. using Thai language rather than Burmese in public spaces – as the most secure way to navigate in Thai society. On the other hand, they repeatedly expressed their strong interest in and belief in the importance of the research topic alongside their hope that the research results might contribute to an improved access to formal education for second-generation migrants in Thailand in the future.

In both MLCs, the interviews took place in a separate room[5] and were conducted as group interviews with two to four students participating. Initial test interviews had shown that students felt more comfortable being interviewed in a peer setting rather than individually. It has been noted that group settings can help to create a safe peer environment for children and youths and reduce the power imbalance between researchers and participants (Adler et al. 2019). On the other hand, group interviews carry the risk that opinion leaders within the group influence the answers and discussion behaviour of other group members. Crucial in this specific context, however, was the generally greater willingness of the interviewees to be questioned in groups. The sampling was done randomly in so far as the respective class teachers had previously asked for volunteers among their students to join the study. Altogether, 40 students in the Marist Learning Centre and 24 students in the Wattana Learning Centre participated in the group interviews. Depending on the number of participants in the group interviews, the interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes. Additionally, guideline-based interviews were conducted with teachers and administrative staff of the MLCs in order to obtain contextual information on both institutions, such as the curriculum, financing aspects, role of language training, etc.

Due to time and funding limitations, this first round of research was conducted over a period of only two weeks; therefore, the amount of time the research team spent with the interviewees was mainly limited to the relatively short group interviews described above. We assume that this impacted the research results in so far as more frequent and intense meetings with the interviewees would have resulted in the establishment of a relationship of mutual trust and would have allowed for a deeper understanding of their perceptions.

The research was based on prior and informed consent by the interviewees and their parents as well as the rectorate of both MLCs. The research was undertaken in accordance with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki (WMA 2018) and the Statement of Ethics by the American Anthropological Association (AAA 2012). The ethics approval for this research was obtained from the Committee for Research Ethics (Social Sciences), Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand (COA No. 2019/07-240). In order to protect the identity of the study participants, no names are disclosed in this paper.

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5    We were allowed to use the only separate room in the Wattana Learning Centre, which was usually used by the teachers for preparing lessons.

## Preliminary research results

As explained in the introduction of the two MLCs, there is a significant difference between the two educational institutions in terms of the curricular importance of language training. The Wattana Learning Centre is essentially a Myanmar educational institution, which aims at enabling its students to continue their further education in Myanmar. The Marist Learning Centre, on the other hand, tries to prepare its students for a potential further educational path in Thailand and contributes to the linguistic integration of its students in Thailand.

These fundamental differences were reflected primarily in the interviewees' self-assessment of their Thai language skills and also in their future education and job ambitions. Generally, students from the Marist MLC suggested that their Thai language skills were at least at a basic level that allowed them to interact with native Thais. Students aged 15 years and above often reported being relatively fluent in Thai and able to assist their parents in situations when they needed Burmese-Thai translation, for example during hospital visits. Most interviewees at Marist MLC also expressed the wish to continue higher education in Thailand, hoping to find decently paid employment in the future in Thailand in order to support themselves and their families. For example, one student at the Marist MLC stated: "I am fluent in spoken and written Thai and can express and read everything I want in Thai. Yet, I prefer to use Burmese language."[6] However, older students in their early twenties who had successfully finished the international diploma programme offered by the Marist MLC in cooperation with the ACU explained in an informal conversation that they sometimes preferred using the Thai language with their Myanmar friends in public so as to be recognised as Thai rather than Myanmar and, thus, less likely to experience discrimination, such as derogatory treatment. As one of the ACU graduates told us: "although I can make a relatively decent living in Ranong, I will go back to Yangon [the former capital of Myanmar], to work there, and contribute to the development of my country."[7] When we asked the student for her reasons, she said that Myanmar would not be able to improve upon its socio-economic situation unless people who had attained higher education abroad returned to contribute to the socio-economic betterment of the country. At the same time, she admitted that, although born in Ranong, she was proud to be Myanmar and would therefore not consider applying for Thai citizenship,[8] but preferred to live in her country of origin.

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6    Male student, 15 years old, interview at Marist MLC, Ranong, 5 August 2010.

7    Informal conversation with the two CBIs and one of their male friends at a local restaurant in Ranong, 4 August 2019.

8    In some of the interviews and conversations, students who were 18 and older told us that they had filed applications for Thai citizenship but had never heard back from the authorities.

In the Wattana MLC, most students assessed their Thai language skills as either non-existent or very basic. In some cases, students considered the Thai language proficiency of their parents as being more advanced than their own. Still, many of the students expressed interest in improving their Thai language skills, as they considered them important for their everyday lives in Ranong.[9] With regard to their future education aspirations, most students at the Wattana MLC expressed interest in finishing their high school degrees in Myanmar or finding a job in Ranong after finishing grade eight at the MLC. In some cases, older siblings of the interviewees had finished their high school degrees in Myanmar or were currently pursuing their last two years in a high school in Myanmar at the time of this study.

Whereas most students interviewed at the Marist MLC were either born in Ranong or had come at a very early age to Thailand, the migration histories of the interviewees at the Wattana MLC were more complex and, in some cases, characterised by moving back and forth between Myanmar and Thailand, depending on whether one or both of their parents had the opportunity to work in Ranong. Students who had either lived longer periods in Myanmar or frequently went back to visit their families expressed a strong sense of belonging to their place of origin in Myanmar and also imagined their future there rather than in Ranong or other places in Thailand. The students at Wattana MLC more frequently reported close relations to and regular interactions with family members in Myanmar. This included the regular sending of financial remittances by their parents to Myanmar.

Another very crucial factor affecting how the students in both MLCs assessed their local integration, as well as personal attachment to Ranong, was the nature of the legal documents they possessed. Only very few of the interviewees were holders of the so-called ten-years-residence card and, thus, able to prove their legal presence in Thailand when detained by the police. Most students only possessed a student card issued by their respective MLC, which is not considered an official identification document in Thailand. As one student explained: "In the past, we could live in Ranong without official documents, but now we need them, even if we are not working."[10] As obtaining residence registration is a costly and lengthy bureaucratic process, most of our interviewees did not possess official registration documents. Especially students who had only limited Thai language skills described how they would only rarely leave their neighbourhoods, as they were afraid of being taken into custody by the police and not being able to explain themselves in such a situation. Without a doubt, this restriction of movement constitutes an alienating experience in the host society as compared to the freedom of movement when residing in or visiting Myanmar.

9   Three male students, 14, 15 and 16 years old, interviewed at Wattana MLC, 13 August 2019.
10   A female student, 15 years old, interview at Wattana MLC, 13 August 2019.

The extent to which students interacted and socialised with the native Thai population of Ranong depended highly on the neighbourhoods their families lived in. Students who lived in mixed neighbourhoods had mostly experienced friendly but distant relations with their Thai neighbours. Students who lived in predominantly Myanmar quarters had none or very few Thai acquaintances or friends and reported only rare interactions with native Thais. Interviewees who had regular and frequent interaction with Thai nationals not only showed a stronger sense of belonging to Ranong but were also less likely to talk about experiences of discrimination in their everyday lives. However, nearly all respondents had experienced some kind of discrimination and showed a strong awareness of the fact that they were not equal to the native Thai population. At the same time, although students reported discriminatory experiences, in most cases they were reluctant to discuss them in detail. This might be explained by both the sensitivity of the issue as well as the limited amount of time the researchers spent with the students, which left little room for building a deeper relationship of trust.

## Conclusions

In this article, we presented methodological reflections as well as preliminary results of an ongoing research project that aims to contribute to the understanding of the interplay between language acquisition and self-perceived integration of second-generation migrants from Myanmar in Thailand. Although the research area Ranong hosts the largest number of migrant workers and migrant workers' children as a share of the province's native Thai population, thus far, the issue of the interplay between language acquisition, sense of belonging and self-perceived integration of second generation migrants in this region has not been taken up by social science research.

The preliminary results of this study indicate that, for the children of migrant workers from Myanmar, Thai language skills are closely interlinked with how they perceive their integration into Thai society and how strongly they feel a sense of belonging to Ranong in particular and Thailand in general. The better the students assessed their Thai language proficiency, the stronger they felt connected to Ranong, and the more positively they evaluated their local integration into Thai society.

However, despite the fundamental differences in Thai language training quality in the two researched MLCs, this study found that most of the interviewees in both institutions regarded themselves as second-class members of Thai society. This was mainly due to experiences of everyday discrimination as well as the insecure legal status of most of the study's participants. Both MLCs

clearly constitute a parallel space within the predominantly Thai society, as they were attended solely by Myanmar students. Although the MLCs play a vital role in providing educational access for the children of Myanmar migrant workers who otherwise would most likely not attend any educational institution, they are also a signifier of the prevailing segregation between migrant and native Thai children and youths.

In principal, Thailand's "Education for All" policy must be viewed as a promising approach that reflects and is in line with the global Sustainable Development Goals agenda. But, in order to live up to this promise, the Thai government needs to actively create incentives for migrant worker families to school their children in Thai educational institutions by, for example, offering bi-lingual primary education and/or special language training programmes.

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