

Three doors of discrimination: The causal mechanisms of educational challenges for migrant children from Myanmar

 Frank Bird, Marist Asia Foundation, Thailand

 Email: francisbird@gmail.com

 Shwe Zin Thin, Marist Asia Foundation, Thailand

 Email: shwezinthin045@gmail.com

 Yoon Thiri, Marist Asia Foundation, Thailand

 Email: yonthiri456@gmail.com

Abstract

In Thailand, the challenges of providing education to migrant children from Myanmar are many and well-documented: linguistic, cultural, and social barriers, hidden educational costs, negative perceptions toward migrant children, and documentation and security concerns. These challenges culminate in a harsh reality. Migrant children in Thailand are more likely to be out of school than in any form of education (UNICEF, 2019). This article utilises critical realism as a theoretical framework to examine the educational crisis faced by migrant learners in Ranong and Tak Provinces, Thailand. It reveals the three doors of discrimination – the document curse, the employment gate, and the education trap – as some of the key invisible realities contributing to the visible educational barriers. We argue that educational responses that overlook these underlying causes cannot address the structural injustices that exclude migrant children from meaningful, sustained access to education.

Key Words

Thai-Myanmar border, critical realism, migrant education

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there have been a number of policy developments aimed at supporting the enrolment and inclusion of non-Thai children, particularly reflected in the growing number of Myanmar migrant children attending Thai public schools (Narawat, 2012). However, overall progress on Thailand's commitment to Education for All (EFA) has been slow. Research indicates more than 50% of all migrant children in Thailand, a staggering 200,000, are estimated to be out of education (UNICEF, 2019) and disruption of education has persisted following the pandemic and the Myanmar military coup beginning in 2021. Why such large numbers of Myanmar migrant children continue to be out of school, particularly on the Thai-Myanmar Border, is the central problem this article seeks to address.

A review of literature regarding Myanmar migrant education in Thailand identifies the following barriers to educational quality and access: migrant poverty, insufficient educational facilities, narrow curricula, low teacher salaries leading to dropout, inadequate teacher training, Thai language learning deficits, and access challenges to Thai public schools (Lowe, Win, and Tyrosvoutis, 2022; Tyrosvoutis, 2019; UNICEF, 2019). This article seeks to uncover the deeper underlying factors preventing Myanmar migrant children and youth from accessing and completing education in Thailand using critical realism as an analytical framework. It will be argued that conflicting and discriminatory education and immigration policies allow large numbers of migrant workers to enter Thailand, but restrict their

To cite this article: Bird, F., Zin Thin, S., and Thiri, Y. (2025). 'Three doors of discrimination: The causal mechanisms of educational challenges for migrant children from Myanmar', *Education and Conflict Review*, 5, pp. 135–142

education access and pathways. These policies around documentation, employment restrictions, and education pathways amount to multiple ‘doors of discrimination’ resulting in the continued denial of education to migrant children.

The findings of this study build upon previous research of Bird (2023), which identified many ‘visible’ challenges (such as a lack of teacher training and a lack of resources), and some of the less visible challenges, such as accreditation, a lack of collaboration with government, and outright discrimination. Because Bird’s research followed an action research methodology, it focussed upon the lack of teacher training that members of the community saw as its most pressing problem. This research seeks to analyse the deeper political and economic reasons why children are not accessing education.

This research starts from the position that meaning is created and interpreted from within an individual’s cultural and historical environment (Merriam, 2009) as well as undertaking research from an emancipatory perspective seeking real transformational education change (Freire, 1970; 2017). This research was conducted in 2022 with teachers and communities associated with Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) in Mae Sot and Ranong. These two border communities contain approximately 84 of the 110 migrant learning centres in Thailand and have a high proportion of migrants who send their children to MLCs instead of Thai public schools (Tuangratananon *et al*, 2019). Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, educational leaders saw an increase in Myanmar

migrant children requesting entry into MLCs. The exact number of MLCs and migrant children remains uncertain and continues to fluctuate, reflecting the evolving nature of education in crisis situations.

Analytical framework - critical realism

Critical realism invites a critical look at what people normally consider reality. Like an iceberg, there is more than what can be observed or experienced directly: most of the iceberg is, in fact, below the surface and invisible. Critical realism allows access to deeper insights as to how things came to be. It also helps frame and construct alternative scenarios (Luke, 2009). To understand the iceberg in its holistic form requires going beyond what can be observed empirically. In developing the philosophical approach to the world known as ‘critical realism,’ Roy Bhaskar named three levels of reality: the ‘empirical’ domain of things we experience; the deeper domain of the events themselves, which he called the ‘actual’; and – yet deeper – the ‘underlying structures and mechanisms’ that give rise to the other levels, which he called the ‘real’ (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen, 2020). Critical realism insists that we will only be able to understand and change the social world if we can identify and address the underpinning structures at work that create it (Corson, 1991).

Access to education for migrants and refugees is complex, influenced by multifaceted factors. Critical realism helps resist a simplistic diagnosis of a problem, directing attention toward the underlying causal mechanisms (Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2014; Buch-Hansen and Nielsen, 2020).

Table 1. The three levels of critical realism

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| ‘Empirical’ level | e.g., the visible data: out-of-school children; lack of adequate classroom spaces and resources |
| ‘Actual’ level | e.g., illegal status of migrant learning centres; lack of collaboration or cooperation with government agencies; restrictions on access to Thai Government Schools |
| ‘Real’ level | e.g., conflicting education and immigration policies discriminatory practices toward Myanmar migrants. |

A deeper investigation under the ‘empirical’ level will reveal the tension between assimilation into Thailand and return to Myanmar; the competing interests behind the politics of education, labour, economics, and immigration; and discriminatory practices hidden behind national security concerns.

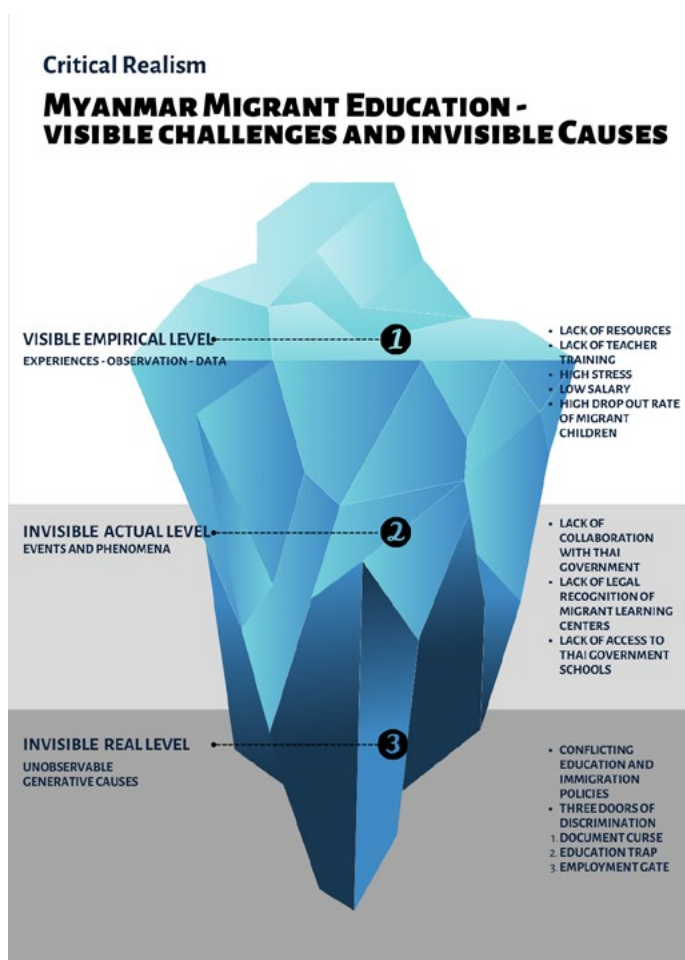
Research design

To identify the underlying factors preventing migrant children and youth from accessing and completing education, data was collected over a period of several weeks in 2022. Purposeful sampling gathered the perspectives of diverse stakeholders from two border contexts: The Marist Asia Foundation;¹ Guiding Star MLC and Ranongthani MLC in Ranong Province; and multiple MLCs in Mae Sot, Tak Province. Data was gathered through qualitative survey responses, semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, and documenting the personal narratives of migrant teachers. This involved 24 teachers and 6 educational leaders participating in 15 interviews and 3 focus groups. The narratives of migrant teachers were sought to provide a richer insight into the phenomenon of MLCs and migrant experiences of oppression beyond the classroom. Thematic analysis was undertaken using both deductive codes drawn from the literature review as well as the generation of inductive codes.

Findings

As seen in Figure 1, the examination of the data revealed causal mechanisms underneath educational access challenges.

Figure 1. An analysis of the root causes of out-of-school migrant children using critical realism



1 Marist Asia Foundation Migrant Learning Centre. www.maristasiafoundation.org

The empirical level: Barriers to educational access and continuity

Perspectives from participants in this study confirmed the evident challenges for MLCs on the Thai-Myanmar border, including poor facilities, low salaries, a lack of teacher training, continued financial vulnerability leading to high teacher turnover, and a high student dropout rate. Thematic analysis revealed just how frequently visible challenges featured in participant responses: lack of teacher training (171 occurrences), stress (43), and low salary (41) were the top three problems mentioned.

One Myanmar migrant teacher summed up both the lack of resources and the daily stress:

We welcomed 600 students, but we did not have enough room because of our small building for 300, and we do not have enough teachers because we do not have enough budget. There is no rest for teachers, they sometimes have to run between 2 classrooms.

The level of the ‘actual’: The underlying causes of educational barriers

Migrant education leaders pointed beyond challenges in the visible classroom to a lack of government support for MLCs, the continued fragility of MLCs not being legally recognised in Thailand, and capacity deficits. Without government support, accreditation, or institutional partnerships, migrant schools depend on donors, resulting in low teacher salaries and high turnover as teachers leave for better pay.

Interview data also reflected the tension and uncertainty of migrant parents who were in a dilemma about whether to send their children to Thai public schools, or prepare for return to Myanmar by sending their children to MLCs. Both options are problematic: Thai schools do not recognise the cultural diversity of Myanmar children and there is no support for learning Thai; while MLCs and their qualifications are not recognised by the Thai government, and the MLCs adopting the Myanmar curriculum are presented with the only option to seek accreditation from the Myanmar national system that is controlled by the Myanmar military government.

Additionally, MLCs struggle with the lack of stable financing. One education manager who has supported migrant education for many years lamented:

I have worked many times with the government. One thing they say is ‘no budget’ for helping migrant people [except social insurance]. No training. [The Thai Government] only gives budget and money for people who have Thai nationality and a 13-digit ID card. Everybody I talked with, thinks in the same way: why should Thai people’s tax money go toward these people? Because they are not Thai, they should not benefit from this money.

Another education manager reflected on the Thai government’s unwillingness to identify the deeper causes of the migrant education challenge:

When the Migrant Learning Centers have problems, they [the Thai government] don’t see their problem. The government does not see it as their problem, it is an NGO problem. Your problem is not my problem. They just feel responsible for Thai schools. If you want to come, come. They allow the Migrant Education Coordination Centre, but they will not give money.

This lack of coordination and support – and the underlying political and economic debate over migrants as ‘burden or benefit’ – eventually pushes large numbers of migrant children toward ‘earning rather than learning’ (Bird, 2023, p.1). These structures keep migrant families poor and uneducated.

The level of the ‘real’: Deep structures that generate barriers to education

Beneath the ‘empirical’ and ‘actual’ levels, is the ‘real’: the political and economic context of a host country seeking to control and manage the flow of migrants (Van Hear, Blackwell, and Long, 2018). Here, we see migrants as ‘3D workers’ –doing the ‘dirty, dangerous, and difficult’ jobs which are unappealing to the general public. One of the interviewees summarised the multifaceted aspects of discrimination entwined with political and economic gain:

...Thailand benefitted by having all of its neighbouring countries destabilised and colonised...When all of their [the migrants] home countries are a total economic mess, they come to Thailand. They [migrants] know they are going to get a low but stable wage and they are not going to be in physical danger like they may be in their home country (or [at least] less physical danger). Tak Province has some of the lowest wages in all of Thailand. That is well documented and researched how abysmally low migrant people are paid. (Education Manager 1, Mae Sot)

This research names the underlying real causes of the migrant education crisis as ‘the three doors of discrimination’: 1. The document curse, 2. The employment gate, and 3. The education trap. While much research on migrant education focuses on factors that reflect the ‘empirical’ and the ‘actual,’ the analysis of the ‘real’ is overlooked, providing only a limited understanding of the educational crisis. We therefore argue that it is crucial to unpack the generating mechanisms of the educational challenges to address the educational barriers that are empirically observed.

The document curse

A lack of legal documentation poses a barrier for many migrant children in Thailand to access the public education system. There are two official channels for regularisation of undocumented migrants in Thailand: the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) programme, and the periodic regularisation window (Dokovic, 2023). However, the MOU channel only targets migrant workers, leaving migrant children undocumented (IOM, 2019). Similarly, employers tend to prioritise registering migrant workers; migrant children are often neglected even though they are eligible to register as dependents (IOM, 2019). This leaves a number of migrant children undocumented and vulnerable. One of the teachers expressed this frustration:

I don’t know why they don’t like us... why they hate us... why they treat us like that. Maybe it is past history. Thai people always make money from us. They sit and collect money from us as we use their name on our documents to become legal. Burmese have to work hard all day long and just earn a little bit of money. (Myanmar migrant teacher 3)

Even though the 2005 Education for All policy of the Thai government has removed documentation barriers by allowing migrant children with no legal status to attend Thai public schools, migrant parents are often asked for official documents during school enrollment (Asian Research Center for Migration, 2022; IOM, 2019; Tuangratananon, *et al*, 2019). Consequently, a considerable number of migrant children remain out of school (IOM, 2019).

In addition, migrant children who do manage to complete their education at a Thai public school find it challenging to continue their education. Although the Ministry of Education has developed guidelines on university admission of students without legal status, the success rate and processes are unclear (IOM, 2019). Additionally, the cost of a university education is impossible for most migrant families. Adolescents with no legal status cannot benefit from student loans or Thai government financial support programmes (Asian Research Center for Migration, 2022). In the rare cases of migrant parents who can afford the cost of tertiary education, travel restrictions related to documentation make it difficult for young people to attend university.

To address the problem of legal status, the Thai government provides G-code numbers to students enrolled in Thai public schools; however, this policy does not extend to MLCs. This G-code can later be transferred to a 13-digit number which enables access to health care benefits and (upon completion of a bachelor’s degree) Thai citizenship (The Committee on Education, House of Representatives, 2024). However, the government prevents G-code holders from obtaining a 13-digit number if it finds that the parents of the child hold citizenship of another country. The educational and financial obstacles are immense.

The employment gate

If a migrant teenager has overcome the document curse, has legal identity and documentation, and finished education, the challenge continues with the employment gate – and this challenge, in turn, discourages migrant children from seeking education. Among the limited number of migrant students who successfully complete secondary education in Thailand or attain post-secondary qualifications at technical colleges or universities, the employment landscape remains constrained.

According to the Ministry of Labour, migrant workers are restricted to eight categories of work in the low-skilled work sector: Agriculture, Construction, Domestic work, Fishing, Garment factories, Hospitality, Manufacturing, and Seafood Processing (UNDP's Bangkok Regional Hub, 2023).

A Myanmar migrant teenager having recently completed education at an MLC reflected, 'I finished school and now I sit at home doing nothing and I worry about my future.' For a migrant from Myanmar to seek employment, they need to be legally documented, and in seeking higher-paying positions, they must first obtain a completely different visa than that of migrant workers confined to the narrow eight categories of work. This process presents significant challenges, as it necessitates returning to Myanmar to apply for a new visa and re-entering Thailand on an international passport. Such a procedure is fraught with difficulties, including high costs, extensive documentation requirements, and complex legal barriers. Even highly-skilled and resourceful migrants often find it financially prohibitive to obtain an international passport and fulfil the requisite criteria for higher-level employment. As a result, when legal job opportunities are predominantly confined to low-skilled categories, migrant children are less likely to pursue educational advancement (UNICEF, 2019).

The education trap

A consequence of the employment gate's legal restriction on jobs available for migrant workers can be recognised as a disincentive for education: the education trap. Chan (2022) refers to this as an educational 'transnational opportunity trap' which often exists for Myanmar migrant students and their parents. Higher education does not necessarily result in higher salary. Interviewed graduates in Ranong of a university programme reflected that although they completed a higher education pathway, they were still unable to be legally employed as a teacher, translator, or health worker and to receive the same salary as a Thai national.

At an MLC parent meeting, one parent considered the cost of his child's education, and reflected:

Why should I keep my child at school when no matter how many years they spend at school they will still end up working in the [fish] factory?

Normally, a higher level of education corresponds to a wider range of employment opportunities and higher wages. This justifies parental sacrifices to provide their children with higher education opportunities. However, a migrant family with a child seeking to continue their studies faces a difficult opportunity cost: while struggling to provide for their current livelihoods, can they also afford education knowing it is unlikely to be rewarded in the future with a higher salary for their child? The opportunity cost of education becomes an education trap.

Conclusion

This study sought to employ critical realism to illuminate the invisible factors keeping migrant children out of school. While both Thai public schools and Migrant Learning Centers need to offer practical support, these superficial challenges cannot be resolved by solutions on the 'empirical' level like offering learning in migrants' native languages or easier enrolment procedures.

Delving under the 'empirical' level to the 'actual', and below that, to the 'real' can help reveal the root causes of so many of the educational challenges on the Thai-Myanmar border. The three doors of discrimination will remain firmly closed without action. In the case of the document curse, unless legal documentation processes for children improve, there will continue to be large numbers of children out of school. In the case of the employment gate, unless migrant children can access employment opportunities beyond the narrow eight categories of legal work – the '3D' jobs – there is no incentive to access and complete education. Likewise, unless the legal change is made to the narrow legal employment opportunities for migrants, the completion of secondary and tertiary education will continue to be a costly 'education trap' that does not eventuate in legal and higher-salary employment positions. But it all starts with the document gate. Continued advocacy for a policy of periodic registration for migrant children is needed as well as issuing G-code numbers to migrant children enrolled in MLCs throughout Thailand.

Deep change in migrant education – the doors of discrimination starting to crack open – could begin by initiatives to change how Thais perceive the migrants in their midst. The Thai government could endorse initiatives aimed at transforming prevailing

negative perceptions of migrants, framing them as assets to the Thai economy and society rather than as burdens (Muntarbhorn, 2005). It would also be valuable to hear and promote positive case studies of migrant education and positive partnership arrangements between MLCs and the Thai government. Given Thailand's decreasing population, reframing the Thai public perception of migrants – as a benefit, not a burden – is an important strategy. Encouraging policy direction to allow more secure long-term legal status for migrants; promoting and supporting secondary and higher education pathways; and opening up more employment categories with better salaries: all are ways to start breaking down the three doors of discrimination and creating a brighter future for all residents of Thailand, native and migrant alike.

Author bios

Francis Bird has been working in Southern Thailand for the past 10 years as an advocate for migrant teachers and learning centers, the subject of his Masters' Thesis.

Shwe Zin Thin grew up in a Migrant Learning Center in Ranong, Thailand, and taught at MLCs for two years; currently she is studying for her master's degree in Human Rights and Democratization at Mahidol University.

Yoon Thiri is also from a migrant community in Ranong, Thailand; she has her BA in teaching from Asia Pacific International University and now teaches at Marist Asia Foundation in Ranong.

References

Asian Research Center for Migration. (2022). *Investing in a global future: A situational analysis of migrant children's education in Thailand*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/thailand/media/9886/file/Investing%20in%20a%20Global%20Future%20-%20Full%20Research%20Report%20EN.pdf> (Accessed: 18 March 2025).

Bird, F. (2023). *Earning vs Learning: Supporting Myanmar Migrant Education on the Thailand-Myanmar Border*. Open Access Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington, Thesis. doi: 10.26686/wgtn.23949354.

Buch-Hansen, H., and Nielsen, P. (2020). *Critical Realism Basics and Beyond*. London: Red Globe Press.

Chan, O. N. (2022). 'A transnational opportunity trap? The missing link between educational attainment and future prospects for Myanmar migrant students in Thailand', in Atterberry, A.L., McCallum, D.G., Tu, S. Lutz, A., and Bass, L.E. (eds) *Children and Youths' Migration in a Global Landscape* (Sociological Studies of Children and Youth 29), pp. 141–166. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited. doi: 10.1108/S1537-46612022000029009.

Cochran-Smith, M., Ell, F., Grudnoff, L., Ludlow, L., Haigh, M., and Hill, M. (2014). 'When complexity theory meets critical realism: A platform for research on initial teacher education'. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 41(1), 105–122.

Committee on Education, House of Representatives (2024). *Report on study results: Motion to consider educational guidelines for children without proof of citizenship or no Thai citizenship*. [Unpublished manuscript].

Corson, D. (1991). 'Bhaskar's critical realism and educational knowledge', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 12(2), pp. 223–241. doi: 10.1080/0142569910120206.

Dokovic, Z. (2023). *Compendium of good practices in enabling access to legal identity for undocumented migrants*, Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM). Available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/compendium-good-practices-enabling-access-legal-identity-undocumented-migrants> (Accessed: 10 April, 2025).

Freire, P. (1970/2017). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Penguin Books.

Harkins, B. (ed). (2019). *Thailand migration report* (United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand). Available at: <https://thailand.un.org/en/50831-thailand-migration-report-2019> (Accessed: 18 March 2025).

Lowe, T., Win, N., and Tyrosvoutis, G. (2022). *Stepping stones: The impact of twin crises on the future of migrant education in Thailand*. Mae Sot: The Inclusive Education Foundation. Available at: https://helpwithoutfrontiers.org/sites/helpwithoutfrontiers.org/files/resources-docs/stepping_stones_full_report_eng.pdf (Accessed: 18 March 2025).

Luke, A. (2009). 'Critical realism, policy, and educational research,' in Ercikan, K. and Wolff-Michael, R. (eds), *Generalizing from educational research: Beyond qualitative and quantitative polarization*, (pp. 183–220). New York: Routledge.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. [Online]. Wiley.

Muntarbhorn, V. (2005). *The Mekong challenge employment and protection of migrant workers in Thailand: National laws/practices versus international labour standards*. Available at: https://s3.eu-west-3.amazonaws.com/observatoirebdd/2005_The_Mekong_Challenge_Migrant_Workers_Thailand_ILO.pdf (Accessed: 20 March 2025).

Nawarat, N. (2012). 'Thailand education policy for migrant children from Burma', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 47, pp. 956–961. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.763.

Save the Children. (2014). *Migrant education annual report. Pathways to a better future: A review of education for migrant children in Thailand*. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/pathways-better-future-review-education-migrant-children-thailand/> (Accessed: 20 March 2025).

Tuangratananon, T., Suphanchaimat, R., Julchoo, S., Sinam, P. and Putthasri, W. (2019). 'Education policy for migrant children in Thailand and how it really happens; A case study of Ranong Province, Thailand', *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(3), 430, pp. 1–16. doi: 10.3390/ijerph16030430.

Tyrosvoutis, G. (2019). *Bridges: Participatory action research on the future of migrant education in Thailand*. TeacherFOCUS. Available at: <https://www.inedfoundation.org/research-publication/bridges> (Accessed: 18 March 2025).

Tyrosvoutis, G., Sasaki, M., Chan, L., Win, N., Zar, T., Win, N.N., Moo, N.T., and Paw, N.N.Y. (2021). 'Deep change in low-resource classrooms: Data-driven teacher professional development for educators from Burma using a choice-based approach', *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 20(3).

UNDP's Bangkok Regional Hub. (2023). *Seeking opportunities elsewhere: Exploring the lives and challenges of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand*. Available at: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-12/undp-mmr_seeking-opportunities-elsewhere_nov_2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 18 March 2025)

UNICEF Thailand. (2019). *Education knows no border: A collection of good practices and lessons learned on migrant education in Thailand*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/thailand/media/3696/file/Education%20knows%20no%20border%20-%20report.pdf> (Accessed: 18 March 2025)

Van Hear, N., Bakewell, O., and Long, K. (2018). 'Push-pull plus: Reconsidering the drivers of migration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44 (6), pp. 927–944. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384135.