

## **Unspoken Inequalities: Effects of Online Learning Responses to Covid-19 on Migrant Children and Their Families, Chiang Mai, Thailand**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on children's education worldwide, albeit with different impacts. Children in impoverished families have to suffer the direst impacts from a lack of access to education, public health, food and various forms of threats. In Thailand, the first confirmed COVID-19 infection was identified in January 2020. The government eventually imposed the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in the State of Emergency (the Emergency Decree) in March 2020, to put in place social distancing and closure of schools, among other things. In May the Thai government also introduced "online learning" in an effort to continue the education of children. Such "online learning" hinges on using homes as a base to provide learning. This article is an attempt to analyse the impacts of such "online learning" policies on the accumulation of human capital among the second-generation of migrant children in the context of the urban poor in the city of Chiang Mai. This analysis is based on data acquired from the research on "The adaptation of second-generation Shan migrant children through education in Thailand". The paper analyzes 13 migrant families whose children studied at Grades 6 and 9 at municipal schools in Chiang Mai city. Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from representatives of 13 migrant families during August and September 2020. It was found that the announced online learning was not implemented effectively because most of the children's homes lacked resources to access online learning tools. Such findings indicate a structural problem in which the Thai authorities make the migrant workers vulnerable in terms of economic citizenship and public health at the expense of their children's education. Such workers and families are forced to stay outside the public welfare, security and social safety net both before and in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.

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**Keywords:** COVID-19, Thailand online learning policy, Migrant children, Educational inequality, Chiang Mai Municipal schools.

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### **Journal of Advances in Humanities Research**



**Vol. 1, No.1, 2022**

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## INTRODUCTION

A city teeming with diverse ethnicities, Chiang Mai has been a major trade hub in the upper reach of Mekong since precolonial times. In the late 20th century, Chiang Mai's economy benefited from cheap labor constantly migrating from neighbouring countries. People of Tai Yai/Tai (Shan) are among migrant workers who have contributed enormously to Chiang Mai and the North. But the economic lives of migrant workers are frequently precarious, a predicament exacerbated by the policies of the Thai state. Such policies confine workers from neighbouring countries to unskilled labor subject to highly dangerous work, including construction or in the agricultural sector, the latter frequently exposing them to harmful chemicals. Additionally, there is a lack of freedom of association, precluding unionization. Finally, the labor laws in Thailand restrict their access to social welfare, regardless of their having work permits and having entered the country legally.

Their vulnerabilities also include their lack of legal citizenship, rendering them undocumented and without work permits. Pierre Bourdieu explained how such a phenomenon emerged worldwide propelled by globalization and neoliberalism. A massive number of migrants have neither job security nor the capacity to fend for themselves. Such a lack of sustainability extends to their children. Meanwhile, such vulnerabilities tend to appear in major cities around the world which adopt extreme nationalism and hostility toward both old and new migrants. Such a trend is once again simmering in different corners around the world and obscuring the contribution of migrant workers toward the accumulation of economic wealth and cultural capital (Rios, Burke, & Aleman-Tovar, 2021).

As for Thailand, migrant workers are a critical manufacturing resource, despite the fact that they are not included in the nation's social welfare and social safety net. According to the Foreign Workers Administration Office, in the middle of 2020 during the Covid-19 crisis, there were 2,494,272 migrant workers issued with work permits throughout the Kingdom (Zhang, 2021). The number was about half a million lower than that of August 2019 (Office, 2019-20). Just for Chiang Mai which is the largest employment hub in the North, in August 2020 it was found there were migrant workers employed in 101,022 jobs throughout Chiang Mai: about 28,000 jobs fewer than in the middle of 2019 (Office, 2019-20). Most of the migrant workers came from Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> Besides Shan, the other ethnicities included Burman, Karen, Kachin, and Muslim Burman. The decline of jobs during the Covid-19 crisis can be attributed to two major causes. First, many workers moved back to their country before the Thai government's border closure. Secondly, many remaining workers fail

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to renew their work permits, becoming illegal workers. The latter scenario has made the lives of the migrant workers and their children even more vulnerable.

### **ONLINE LEARNING POLICY DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS**

Thailand's first confirmed infection was in January 2020. In Chiang Mai, the first such case was made known in April of the same year. Various preventive measures have since been introduced at different levels and relief measures to cater to the vulnerable populations with the government budgeting two trillion baht or 14.3% of GDP from May-August 2020. Such relief and compensation have been disbursed to ameliorate the impact of Covid-19 among various groups of people, including employees and workers in the tourism sector, low-income people, vulnerable groups, farmers and unemployed persons outside the social security net as well as new graduates still unemployed or looking for jobs. Nevertheless, such relief and rehabilitation measures do not cover migrant workers whose livelihood is really on edge. They have to exploit themselves just to make their ends meet. A question in point is, what will be the impacts on the education of their children, as part of the reproduction of human capital?

In "The Forms of Capital," (1986), (Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986) suggests a model of capital accumulation in which individuals hold economic, cultural and social capital (Challoumis, 2021). The continuity of such capital persists from generation to generation and warrants the conversion of profits from one kind of capital to others. In addition, it requires the acceptance of society to offer opportunities and conditions to ensure such reproduction of capital until they reach a level for sustainable survival. Based on this model of capital accumulation, it should be interpreted that the investment in cultural capital through the provision of education to the second generation of the families of migrant workers should be geared toward increasing the human security and agency of the children to ensure their being skilled labor in the domain of economic capital, and that they can accumulate various other forms of cultural capital (Rios et al., 2021). There is such possibility, as Thai society tends to embrace the children of migrants better than their parents, and the Thai business sector is open to accepting them as workers, earning competitive salaries.

In response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government imposed an emergency decree on 25 March 2020, introducing harsh preventive measures including social distancing, closure of tourist attractions, schools, airports and border checkpoints between Thailand and neighbouring countries. Schools were among the initial places where the government imposed stringent measures to prohibit any activity including the use of the school buildings and all other educational facilities for teaching, training or any other

activities with a number of participants. The order became effective on 3 May 2020, almost the same time as the school opening of all primary schools. The break of the school semester was thus put off to until 1 July 2020. In addition, during May and June 2020, homes were proposed as an alternate site to provide education. This was a dramatic reversal in the history of modern education in Thailand, in which it has been found that the Thai state had absolutely removed the education of children from their homes. Moreover, the homes of people in poverty are already confronting other vulnerabilities and precarity due to the necessities of response to the outbreak of COVID-19 (Hoang et al., 2019; Pattaravanich, Williams, Lyson, & Archavanitkul, 2005). Concerns were raised that such facilities shall not ensure a proper and sustainable learning ecosystem. This would simply exacerbate the already low-quality education and learning of the vulnerable children (Hoang et al., 2019). The issues were subject to widespread debate in various online platforms.

Online learning was declared an urgent education policy of the country. It encompassed at least two components: 1) schooling through distance learning (Distance Learning Television Station - DLTV), and 2) the application of digital technologies to schooling whereby the learners do not need to be physically present in the classrooms (Luangvilai, 2018). It was assumed that the children's homes could serve as a space of learning through digital platforms leased by the Ministry of Education and other public agencies including Zoom, Google Classroom, and Google Hangouts (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2020). Although such platforms had been proposed for organizing the teaching since before the COVID-19 pandemic, they had failed to gain any traction. As a result, schools found it hard to adapt to online learning, and some found it impossible to implement it (Tantip Kitjaroonchai, 2012). Such distance learning had first been adopted in Thailand's basic education in 1996, initiated by the Distance Learning Foundation under the royal patronage of King Rama IX. The Foundation has used such distance learning in remote schools where the border patrol police supply the teaching. The Ministry of Education has since extended the method to schools that could not afford teachers for all levels. Nicknamed "studying with box teachers" (as students sat in front of analog TV screens), such distance learning rapidly expanded into urban areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Education quickly produced content and multiplied broadcast outlets from three to 17 channels. The two-pronged online learning first had a test run on 18 May 2020, after which multi-faceted problems were identified, including the inability of the Ministry of Education to provide resources on time, such as the teaching materials, media, and receivers among

schools as well as access to the frequency range. This is not to mention the hidden costs to various types of families since schools were no longer the delivery-point of learning.

The problem with using “homes” as a learning ecosystem is problematic in view of differences between well-off homes and needy homes, urban homes and remote area homes. The “homes” of vulnerable children have gained public attention since educational inequality has manifested itself glaringly and repetitively in terms of access and survival. Attention has also been paid to the quality of online learning policies and how knowledge is imparted to children. Such home-based education thus reflects how the vulnerable children are neglected by the state, since the internet penetration only covers 41% or around 30,635 villages throughout the country. Meanwhile, even though makeshift homes in the sprawling urban area can in principle gain high speed internet access, these families cannot afford to buy devices and to pay the internet service fees. In 2019, 25% of Thai households lacked internet access in the home: 19% in urban and 31% in rural areas.<sup>6</sup> Thailand’s rate of subscriptions for mobile broadband access was 89 per 100 inhabitants, but the rate for fixed broadband subscriptions was only 15 per 100 inhabitants. The rates were above-average for countries classed as “developing” (middle-income countries), but considerably below the rates for “developed” countries, which were 122 and 34 per 100 respectively. These figures suggest that while a high proportion of children have some access to the internet through mobile phones, far fewer can access it through fixed-line services, which are more suitable for computers and for affordable transmission of video. Indeed, in 2019, only 16% of Thai households had a computer: a startlingly low rate; the average for “developing” countries was 39% and for “developed” countries 82%.

Data from Thai government agencies, including the (Office of Equitable Education Fund, 2018) reinforces the notion that there is a lack of digital devices among poor students. In addition, the Office also stated that the students who can be classified as “poor and destitute” were about 35% of those enrolled in school system or around 1,696,433. These children earn as little as 42 baht per day, which is barely sufficient for the purchase of nutritious food (Luangvilai, 2018). Therefore, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, children from poor families in Thailand, where the number of the poor expanded from nine to 17 million (Hoang et al., 2019), have to face a drastic lack of resources needed for the investment in online learning. They have no access to the internet, digital devices including desktop and laptop computers, tablets and smartphones and the high-speed internet service fees. The debate about the children’s homes also includes how such an ecosystem does not

favour their learning due to a lack of private space, constant noise distraction and a lack of parental care.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The municipal schools of Chiang Mai city are small and middling in size, with an average 100-150 students per school. Ten out of eleven schools in the study provided classes from kindergarten level to Grade 6. The other was a junior high school (Grades 7 to 9).

The economic pressures during COVID-19 unleashed substantial impact on the learning of the children. Among the 13 sampled families, only one managed to buy a new TV with satellite receiver to ensure distance learning for their child (who was in the ninth grade) (Challoumis, 2021). Other families could not afford to buy devices to facilitate online learning (Tantip Kitjaroonchai, 2012). Most families indicated that they felt concerned about their children's education, but there were other expenses of greater priority including rent, food, and face masks. This was life on edge, and they had to manage to ensure their survival and to overcome starvation and illness of their family members. In addition, they felt concerned about being deprived of various relief measures. A mother recounted: "lately, I have to save money to buy cloth masks and hand sanitizer...several hundred baht per month...My children are asked to stay home, while parents go out shopping for their necessary items." In terms of economic capital, the children's families prior to the Covid-19 pandemic earned about 20,000 baht per month but the couples' income has reduced to one third of the normal rate, as their working hours reduced. According to the study, in seven of the 13 families both spouses barely had any income. Among the other six, the parents earned as caretakers of dormitories, security guards, hotel staff and casual hire workers.

However, the study found the families used critical ways of thinking and investment tactics for the education of their children by deploying some kinds of community wealth cultural assets. They all pointed out that they were determined to invest in their children's education to engender cultural capital which they hoped could help them to climb the social ladder through the second-generation children. Such tactics manifested themselves in the devotion of money and other resources into education and the inculcation of habits, such as convincing the children to adhere to the school rules and to dress cleanly, and by parents participating heavily in the schools' activities. Such devotion has yielded sympathy from the schools toward the children regarded as "the others" in the midst of xenophobia. The study found that families continued to support their children's education by imparting certain habits in them through storytelling, e.g., by recounting their difficult life in the past until present,

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their aspiration to attain a better life than the one in which they had to work so hard. According to (Rios et al., 2021), these aspects of capital are portrayed as the “community cultural wealth” of migrant worker communities in the USA (Rios et al., 2021). Rios illustrates how community cultural wealth is a cultural capital the children can accumulate to drive forward their education. Similarly, the teachers in the present municipal schools often reiterated how “Shan parents tend to give more importance to their children’s education than the Thai or native Northern parents...Their children appear to pay attention to their studies, and adhere to the rules; they are helpful and highly patient.”

## CONCLUSIONS

This research exposes the weaknesses of online learning policies during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic given a lack of comprehensive analysis of the state from the upstream (policy-making) to downstream (delivery of learning activities), which would involve a closer understanding of the homes and the students, particularly among the vulnerable populations. The state has invested hugely in the expansion of long-distance learning through the production of content for distance learning programs and the procurement of digital TVs and platform subscriptions for schools. But the failure to pay due attention to the ways in which this investment could impact less-privileged students, like those in the present study, might suggest that the policy served a political function of educational stratification and cost-saving, despite the fact that the national education system in principle espouses educational equality. Migrants, along with other marginal sections of Thai society are thereby impeded in accumulating cultural capital.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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