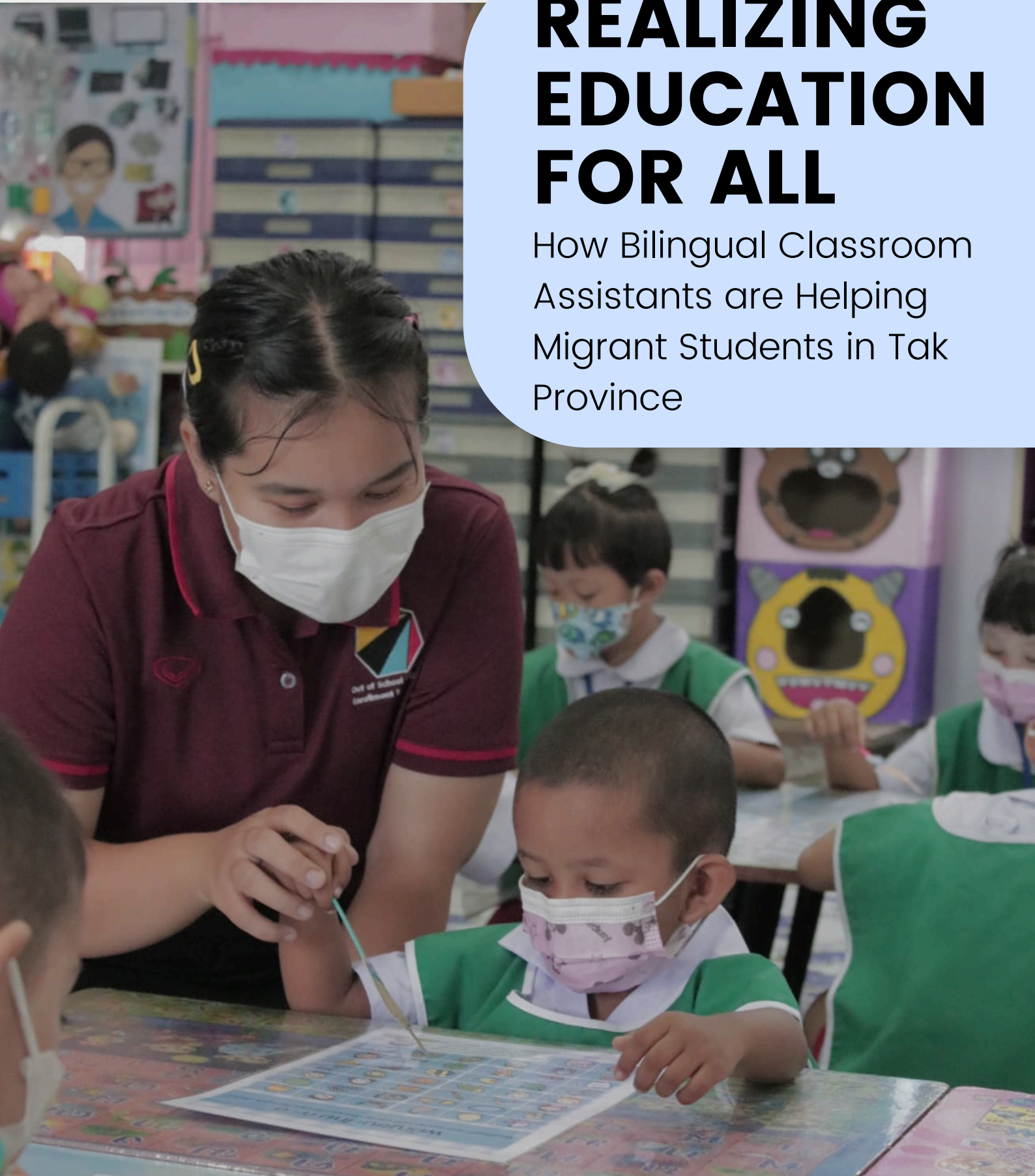


# REALIZING EDUCATION FOR ALL

How Bilingual Classroom Assistants are Helping Migrant Students in Tak Province



## Research Team



Out of School Children  
Enrollment TaskFORCE

Andrew Swindell  
Sunantha Inkhamchuea  
Wanida Lertvorapreecha  
Suphatsara Thambunthawi  
Taw La  
Aye Min Tun  
Naw San Myint Khin  
Tha Zin Aye  
Wirachan Charoensukaran  
Thomas Carey  
Greg Tyrosvoutis

All photos taken and used with permission

© The Inclusive Education Foundation 2024  
[www.inedfoundation.org](http://www.inedfoundation.org)



Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use outlined in CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 for attribution and sharing. Full licence available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Attribution--Please cite the work as follows:

Swindell, A., Inkhamchuea, S., & Lertvorapreecha, W. (2024). Realizing education for all: How bilingual classroom assistants are helping migrant students in Tak Province. The Inclusive Education Foundation. Mae Sot. Thailand.

The views of this publication do not necessarily reflect the policies or opinions of the organisations involved.

# INTRODUCTION

The border province of Tak, Thailand, is home to more than 150,000 formal and informal migrants, most of whom are originally from neighbouring Myanmar. Thailand has made impressive steps towards realizing Education For All (EFA) since 1999, and with the signing of the Cabinet Resolution on July 5th 2005, Thailand guaranteed access to 15 years of free education for all children in the nation regardless of citizenship, documentation, or legal status. In 2018, the Ministerial Proclamation of EFA further eliminated legal obstacles that had prevented migrant children from enrolment in Thai schools.

Thailand is a regional leader for inclusive educational policy, however, Thai public schools have faced significant pressures and challenges to continue to make Education For All a reality. Many Thai public schools in Tak Province, for example, have student bodies with upwards of 80-90% migrant children from Myanmar who only speak Burmese or another ethnic-minority language at home. Most of these children are unable to speak, read, or understand Thai before coming to school, which drastically limits their ability to participate in any classroom learning which occurs in Thai language, with Thai written materials. The absence of a standardized syllabus, materials, and training for multilingual education (MLE) makes adapting the Thai curriculum specifically and the role of a teacher more broadly incredibly difficult.

To address the unique educational needs of Burmese-speaking migrant children attending Thai public schools, the Inclusive Education Foundation (InEd), Help without Frontiers Thailand Foundation (HWF), and the Migrant Educational Coordination Center (MECC) launched a Bilingual Classroom Assistant (classroom assistants) program in 2022 by placing 10 Burmese and Thai speaking classroom assistants in Thai public schools in Tak Province. This initiative seeks to support Thai teachers and multilingual education for Burmese speaking migrant students by bridging the communication gap and facilitating Thai language learning. The benefits of integrating the learners' mother tongue in other contexts are substantial, including increased student participation, enhanced early grade reading outcomes, lower dropout rates, greater parent engagement, and improved student self-confidence, self-esteem, and identity ([Adriano et al., 2021](#); [Perez, 2019](#); [UNESCO, 2015](#)).



# CLASSROOM ASSISTANT IMPACT RESEARCH



In 2023, a study was conducted to evaluate the impact of the classroom assistant program on Thai language learning and the overall educational experience of migrant students. The study was set in 9 Thai public schools in Tak province known for their high populations of migrant students from Myanmar. To assess the effectiveness of the classroom assistants program, seven schools employing classroom assistants for a total 324 students were selected for comparison with two control schools with 155 students in classrooms lacking such support.

The results of this study showed that the classroom assistant program had a significant positive impact on migrant student learning. This report presents this and other key findings which highlight the positive impact classroom assistants have on Thai language learning when accounting for student age, native language, and grade specifically, and how classroom assistants further supported learning engagement and integration to the Thai public schools more broadly.

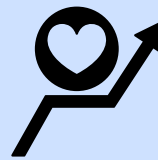
## KEY BENEFITS OF THE CLASSROOM ASSISTANT PROGRAM

**+40%**

higher Thai language proficiency for migrant students with access to a bilingual classroom assistant

**+80%**

higher Thai language proficiency for Burmese speaking students under 6 years of age with access to a bilingual classroom assistant



Increased engagement of students with Thai public school teachers and classroom learning

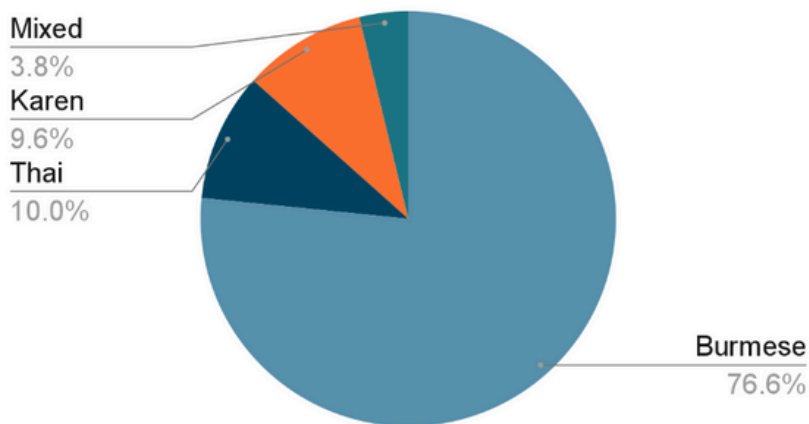


Better communication between Thai public school staff and migrant families

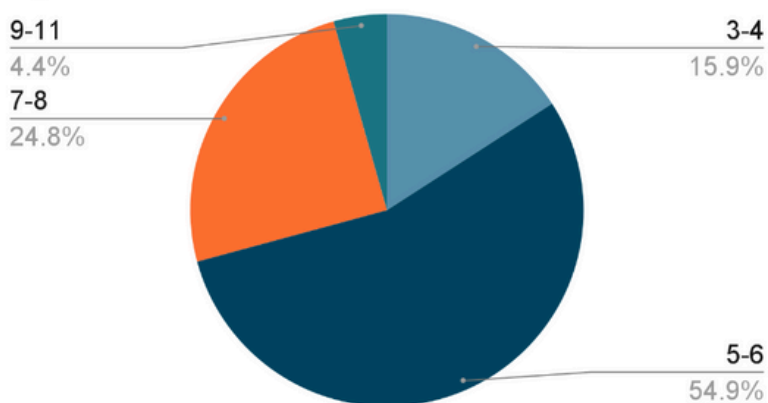
# METHODS

Given the complexities that arise in multilingual settings, this research employed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data was collected to assess the Thai language proficiency improvement over one academic year for students with and without classroom assistants. A literacy test, covering consonant and vowel recognition and production, monosyllable blending, and word knowledge across reading, writing, and listening, was administered to 479 students at the start of the 2023-24 academic year in June and again at the end in February 2024. Statistical analyses were used to compare the improvement in Thai language learning between students in classrooms with and without classroom assistants over the academic year to quantify the program's effectiveness. Qualitative data was collected to complement the test results and provide in-depth insights into the classroom assistants's role in facilitating multilingual education and the integration of migrant students into the Thai education system. In total, 23 semi-structured interviews with classroom assistants, teachers, and school administrators were conducted, in addition to 11 classroom observations of both classroom with and without classroom assistants, and focus groups with migrant students.

**FIGURE 1. MOTHER TONGUE LANGUAGE OF STUDENTS**



**FIGURE 2. AGE OF STUDENTS**



# KEY FINDINGS

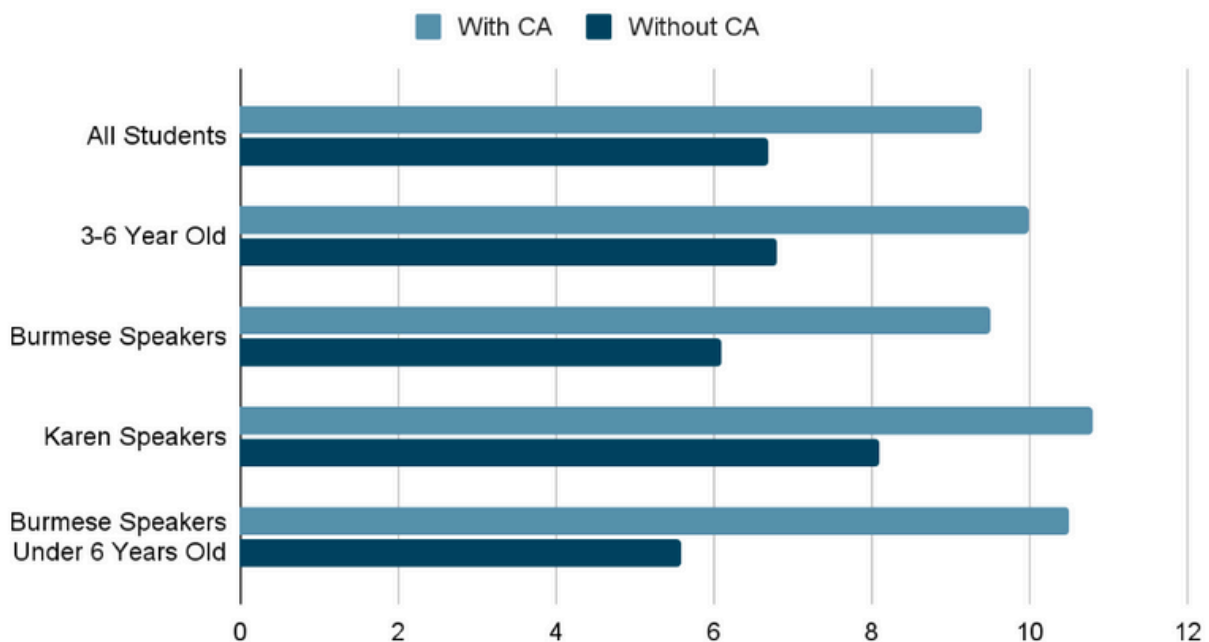
1

## Classroom Assistants Improved Thai Language Learning

The central finding from this study is that classroom assistants improved Thai language learning for migrant children. On average, all students improved their score on the Thai language proficiency test at the end of the year compared to the beginning. Students with a classroom assistant, though, improved 40% more than those without a classroom assistants. For students younger than 6 years old, the improvement was even more pronounced, with a 47% higher score for those with classroom assistants. Regarding language, students whose mother tongue is Burmese showed a 56% higher improvement with classroom assistants, while Karen-speaking students had a 33% higher improvement when assisted by classroom assistants.

The most substantial improvement was observed in students younger than 6 years old with Burmese as their native language. These students demonstrated a 78% greater score improvement with the help of a classroom assistants. Specifically, those without an assistant had an average improvement of 5.89 points, while those with an assistant saw a significant average increase of 10.48 points.

**FIGURE 3. THAI LANGUAGE TEST SCORE IMPROVEMENT (PRE TO POST)**



# 2

## Classroom Assistants Increased Student Engagement

Classroom assistants were a critical factor in increasing classroom engagement among Burmese-speaking migrant students. In classrooms staffed with classroom assistants, there was a notable increase in active learning behaviours, particularly among younger children who were more likely to ask questions, complete activities, and seek clarification. Classroom assistants were found to provide a lifeline for migrant students whereby even just limited interactions in Burmese allowed them to be active participants with the Thai teacher during classroom learning activities. Classroom assistants, with their ability to bridge language gaps, were essential in translating this linguistic proficiency into better Thai language acquisition, leading to a more dynamic and responsive learning environment. In contrast, students without access to a classroom assistant were less active in class, demonstrating the difficult situation that many Thai teachers face.

“

Classroom assistants are like a teacher to help control the class. They also create teaching materials and grade papers. Sometimes they will translate for the whole class, and other times it is for just small groups. Sometimes they will sit with a small group, or with one student to help motivate them to complete the assignment.

- Teacher





### 3 Most Impact on Young Burmese-Speaking Students

The most significant positive impact of classroom assistants on migrant learning was observed among Burmese-speaking students aged 6 years and under. This demographic showed remarkable improvement when supported by classroom assistants, outpacing their peers in language acquisition and classroom participation. The presence of classroom assistants was found to be especially pivotal at this early age, where foundational language skills are being established. These young learners, with the help of classroom assistants, are not only grasping the Thai language more effectively but are also becoming more integrated and successful in their educational environments.

“

The students with the proper age, like 6 years old, are ready to learn and can encourage themselves to learn and be eager to learn Thai language.

- Teacher



## 4 Impact Beyond the Classroom

The influence of classroom assistants was found to extend beyond the confines of the classroom, affecting the broader migrant community. Classroom assistants served as vital communicators, translating and conveying information between the school and migrant parents, a role that proved indispensable in building trust. By bridging the language and cultural divide, they enabled migrant families to feel more connected and involved in their children's education. This engagement was crucial as it fostered a sense of belonging and partnership, which is instrumental in creating an inclusive school community where every family feels valued and supported.

“

The most important way that a classroom assistant can help is to help communicate and coordinate between the parents and the school. Before, the teacher could not communicate at all with the migrant students' parents.. When the classroom assistants came to the school, they helped a lot with this.

- Thai School Director





## **Challenges for Classroom Assistants**

Despite the numerous benefits, classroom assistants in Thai schools faced several challenges in their efforts to support migrant students. Some classroom assistants were perceived as merely translators rather than integral parts of the educational team, leading to varied levels of reception and support from teachers. There was a noted scarcity of Thai as a second language materials, as well as a lack of teacher support for this type of instruction, which hampers the classroom assistants' ability to effectively assist students. Classroom assistants often found themselves burdened with non-teaching duties, and in some instances, they were left to teach independently without sufficient guidance or resources. Additionally, the multilingual nature of the classroom posed a significant challenge, particularly because not all migrant children speak Burmese, with languages like Karen also present, complicating the communication and educational dynamics.

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below explore targeted strategies to bolster the classroom assistants program across three distinct categories: Tak PESAO 2, Thai Public Schools, and local and international supporters. These categories have been chosen based on their pivotal roles in the educational ecosystem and their capacity to enact meaningful change. Tak PESAO 2 represents the administrative and policy-making body capable of providing institutional support and resources necessary for program sustainability. Thai Public Schools are at the frontline, directly interacting with and impacting the student experience; therefore, they are positioned to implement operational and pedagogical enhancements. Lastly, local and international supporters are crucial for garnering wider support and funding, which is essential for scaling up the classroom assistants program's reach and efficacy. The recommendations aim to address gaps, optimize resource allocation, and forge a collaborative pathway forward to improve the educational outcomes for migrant students.



# TAK PESAO 2

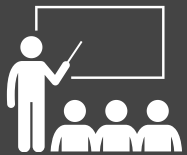


## **1. Increase public funding to expand the bilingual classroom assistant program in schools with a high number of migrant students.**

The findings of this study are clear. Classroom assistants help migrant students learn Thai, engage in classroom learning, and support Thai public schools to communicate with migrant families. Thai teachers face a difficult task in supporting migrant children, and classroom assistants can help these teachers improve their students' language skills. Given the tremendous success we have seen with classroom assistants, the central recommendation from this study is that public funding must be allocated to hire more classroom assistants. Classroom assistants help improve the lives of migrant students, Thai teachers, and Thai public schools more broadly. Moreover, an increase in public funding will help to formalize the program and signal its effectiveness to Thai public school leaders, teachers, and parents.

## **2. Develop and implement specific language learning teacher training and provide necessary curriculum materials to support teachers with many migrant students**

In settings with diverse students, Thai language teaching is difficult and requires different teaching methods than those useful for students who are native speakers. While classroom assistants can assist by co-teaching, additional training and curricula are needed to help support Thai teachers with migrant students. This could be led by trainers at Tak PESAO 2 to develop a bespoke curriculum for teachers working with students not yet fluent in Thai.



Recommendations for

# THAI PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## 1. Optimize how and where classroom assistants are used

Classroom assistants were found to be effective in helping support migrant students in all schools. However, the way that they are employed within schools can increase their impact. One recommendation is for classroom assistants to be used in younger grade levels (KG 2 and below). Classroom assistants are also most effective when they are used as a co-teacher and able to participate in the planning and delivery of classroom instruction with a Thai lead teacher. When possible, classroom assistants should not be used to teach on their own, as the expertise and experience of Thai teachers is crucial for supporting all student learning.



## 2. Provide additional support for classroom assistants and new Thai teachers

In order to help classroom assistants feel valued and be recognized within the broader community, another recommendation is for schools to provide them with administrative support similar to what Thai teachers receive. This support can include providing classroom assistants with a teacher card, school uniforms, lunch, professional development, and organizing peer groups within schools that encourage mentorship from experienced teachers and staff for new teachers and classroom assistants.



# LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL SUPPORTERS



## **1. Invite Thai public school teachers to workshops on language teaching strategies for students not fluent in Thai**

The Out of School Children Enrolment Taskforce currently facilitates the implementation of the classroom assistant program with a series of workshops and trainings before each school year. While these are targeted for classroom assistants, the project would like to invite Thai teachers as well, at no cost, so that they are included in the process and can benefit from discussing targeting teaching and learning strategies for designing classroom instruction for migrant students in particular.



## **2. Provide wrap around support**

Classroom assistants were shown to provide a number of benefits for migrant students in class. To help increase access to schooling for migrants, it is recommended that organizations and foundations support transportation costs, enrolment fees, provide school uniforms, documentation assistance for students and parents. Migrant families need additional support to ensure their children can access Thai public schools.



## **3. Acknowledge the necessity for language support in additional languages like Burmese, Karen and other ethnic minority languages**

While most migrant students currently attending Thai public schools in Tak speak Burmese as their native language, there are of course other students who either have a different mother tongue, or do not speak Burmese at all. Accordingly, the final recommendation is for civil society organizations to continue expanding classroom support for other languages, like Karen and Lahu.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Child's Dream Foundation Thailand for their generous support to bring bilingual classroom assistants to the classrooms of migrant children in Tak Province. We hope this project will create lasting improvements and enhance the quality of education for marginalized students.



A heartfelt thanks to Khun Kanyarat Boonmaleerat from Tak Primary Education Service Area Office 2 for her guidance, leadership, and ongoing support. Your commitment to realizing education for all children in Thailand continues to be an inspiration.

## REFERENCES

Adriano, Ma. N. I., Franco, N. T., & Estrella, E. A. (2021). Language-in-education policies and stakeholders' perception of the current MTB-MLE policy in an ASEAN country. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 44(1), 84–99. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03652067>

Perez, N. B. (2019). *A Comparative Study of the MTB-MLE Programs in Southeast Asian Countries*.

UNESCO. (2015). *MTB-MLE: Mother tongue-based multilingual education: Lessons learned from a decade of research and practice*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000231865>



