

SAFETY NETS

A Situational Analysis of Non-formal Educational Pathways for Migrant Children in Tak Province, Thailand

Executive Summary

April 2022



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2014, the non-formal primary education (NFPE) and non-formal middle school education (NFME) pathways established in Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) in Tak province have provided a safety net for more than 3,500 overage children and youth, giving them a second chance at an education. Currently, 251 students are able to receive an education thanks to these programs. This research spoke to 166 non-formal education stakeholders, including 86 NFPE/NFME students, their parents, and their teachers in the final weeks of November 2021.

The findings highlight the great efforts made over the last 8 years to create a system tailored to the needs of vulnerable children and youth who have lost their right to education via formal systems. Those efforts have created a system which is highly valued by school directors, teachers, parents, and children as being inclusive, flexible, practical, accelerated, and accredited.

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged education systems globally, but marginalized learners have suffered disproportionately. NFPE/NFME providers have worked hard to shift to new modalities in order to maintain learners' access to education. However, restrictions on gatherings have severely limited student contact time and a lack of digital devices and low-cost, reliable internet are major barriers to equitable online learning.

The February 2021 Burmese political crisis has called into question whether NFPE/NFME in Tak province can continue. With the loss of technical, material, and financial support from the Department for Alternative Education (DAE) in Burma, NFPE/NFME providers have not received training, textbooks, or teacher stipends for over twelve months. All stakeholders consider accredited education to be one of the most highly valued aspects of education, but with the potential loss of administrative support from the DAE, this second – and often last chance at education is at risk of being swept away. If non-formal pathways survive, they may be forced to adapt to a future of unaccredited programming.

In the first quarter of 2022, education providers will need to make rapid and difficult decisions if these pathways are to be protected. The evidence from this research underscores three key areas for consideration:

- 1. There is clear need for NFPE/NFME,**
- 2. Alternative pathways offer potential and pitfalls,**
- 3. Investment in NFPE/NFME can drive invaluable improvements**



1.1 The need for NFPE/NFME

NFPE/NFME bridges a crucial gap in educational delivery. For over-age students who are working, only non-formal education systems provide an inclusive environment with flexible timetables and an accelerated, practical curriculum that meets their diverse needs. Two thirds of children interviewed in this research stated that their preferred educational pathway included at least one of these features.

If NFPE/NFME is unable to continue in its current form, stakeholders' responses reveal **there is no clear consensus on a viable alternative pathway that can meet NFPE/NFME students' diverse needs.** In their best efforts to replicate the benefits and advantages of the NFPE/NFME pathways, the majority of children and parents indicated they were interested in pursuing a combination of alternative pathways, and MLC staff indicated willingness to adapt the NFPE/NFME program to support those choices. **Most alarmingly, 8% of students stated that if NFPE/NFME programs were unable to continue they would drop-out of education. This figure is likely an underestimate.**

The current contexts in Burma and Thailand make it highly likely that migration will increase in 2022 and beyond. Children who cross the border will be escaping political repression, poverty, and conflict and will have missed at least two years of formal education. The educational expertise that has been carefully nurtured and has subsequently flourished over the last seven years in the NFPE/NFME eco-system is well positioned to provide a safety-net for vulnerable new arrivals - should it continue.

“For those students who want to return back to Burma; we found that NFPE is the best pathway for our students - they can use the NFPE certificate to enrol into Burma government school.”
- NFPE Teacher

“Education which is flexible is best. Working or education] also depends on our children's choice.”
- NFPE Parent

“I like this program because I can choose the subjects I want to learn, for example, I like sewing, so I chose to learn that one. I like it because there are a lot of practice sessions.”
- NFPE Student



“NFE is useful for parents who want their kids to finish some kind of program. There is nothing better for those who are over-age and need to move grade levels quickly.”
- NFPE Teacher

“Most of the students are ethnic children with some Bamar. The NFPE/NFME pathway is useful for them to learn the language well and it will be essential once they go back to Burma. This can be the start of their opportunities for the future.”
- NFPE School Director

1.2 Alternative pathways offer both potential and pitfalls

Parents are deeply uncertain about their future and the future of their children. Prior to the political crisis, the majority of parents intended to return to Burma. Accredited NFPE/NFME education would have allowed their children to continue their studies. Today, 77% of NFPE/NFME students see their future in Thailand. If NFPE/NFME is unable to continue, or parents and students choose not to continue with the NFE pathway, children and youth face five alternative educational pathways:

1. The MLC formal curriculum,
2. The Thai formal curriculum,
3. Thai NFE,
4. The National Unity Government's (NUG) home-based learning pathway, or
5. Exploring vocational options.

As each pathway represents a change, they bring with them different advantages and disadvantages. **There are no clear alternatives for students who are currently enrolled in NFPE/NFME programs. Every student and family will need to carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of each pathway relative to their individual circumstances.**

Pathway	NFPE	NFME	MLC formal education program	Home-Based Learning provided by the NUG	Thai formal education	Thai Non-Formal Education (Kor-sor-nor)	Vocational Training
Entry requirements	Read/Write Burmese	Grade 4 Certificate	—	—	—	Thai Entrance Exam (read & write Thai)	CERTIFICATE High School
Eligible ages	10	13	4-5	4-5	4-5	15+	18+
Length of program (years)	2	3	12	12	12	6	1-2
Language of Instruction	Myanmar	Myanmar	Myanmar	Myanmar	Thai	Thai	Thai, Myanmar
Subjects included	Myanmar, English, Maths, Social, Income generating, General subject	ICT, Vocational skills, Life skills, Social skills	Myanmar, English, Maths, Social	Myanmar, English, Maths, Social	Thai, English, Maths, Social	Thai, English, Maths, Social	Thai, English, Life Skills, Vocational Skills
Recognized certification	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Costs	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Who is this pathway most suitable for?	Overage, dropout	Overage, dropout. Usually NFPE graduates.	Migrant children who want a Myanmar education	Migrant children who want a Myanmar education	Migrant children who will stay in Thailand for a long time	Migrant children who will stay in Thailand for a long time and want flexibility	Migrant youth seeking employment in Thailand
Full time/part time	Full time	Full time	Full time	Full time	Full time	Full time	Full time

Figure 1: Mapping of Migrant Education Pathways

From the perspective of teachers and school directors, the MLC formal curriculum offers the smoothest transition. Students will be able to continue studying in a language of their home country, in a curriculum that aligns with their past studies. The majority of NFME/NFPE programs are run through MLCs and there are strong professional relationships between MLC staff and the communities they serve. For NFPE/NFME students there are two major drawbacks in the MLC formal curriculum.

Firstly, the pathway is full time, and classes are not scheduled at flexible times that allow learners to work and study concurrently. Secondly, NFPE/NFME students will be required to join the grade level they are currently studying, potentially resulting in them sharing classes with students who are many years their junior. Flexible timetables and the ability to study with similar aged students were repeatedly listed by students and parents as important priorities for their preferred educational pathway.

Theoretically the Thai NFE system offers many of the same advantages as the MLC run NFPE/NFME systems – it largely shares the core characteristics of being inclusive for over-age learners, offers flexible timetables, a practical and accelerated curriculum, and crucially is accredited by the Thai government. **However, a significant barrier for many learners are the entry requirements of basic Thai literacy.** Furthermore, there are additional hidden costs for uniforms, school supplies, and many parents are concerned about organizing transportation.

Although many school directors and teachers believe that the Thai formal education pathway is suitable for NFPE/NFME students, parents, and their children rate this as amongst the least viable pathways. It combines the disadvantages of the MLC formal curriculum (full time, lack of flexible timetable, necessity to study with younger peers) and the disadvantages of the Thai NFE pathway (language and cultural barriers, additional costs).

For students who wish to stay in Thailand long term, enrolling in Thai education may be the most appropriate option. Thai language skills offer students the most flexible, practical route to improved employment options. However, for learners with no interest in learning Thai, or who intend to return to Burma, the MLC formal curriculum pathway may be most appropriate. A final point for all parents to consider is that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, MLCs have faced more severe restrictions than Thai government schools. It is likely that Thai government schools will be able to resume regular education long before MLCs.



“I want pathways in which I can work and study at the same time. I want to have pathways to be able to pass grades quickly, and which guide me on the way to a career.”

- NFPE Student

Migrant parents and their children often face impossible decisions between education and livelihoods. Figures 1 and 2 provide additional guidance for families' decision making. **The loss of the NFPE/NFME safety net will make decision making harder.** Since the start of COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 5 migrant children have disappeared from education records. **The loss of NFPE/NFME will make it less likely out-of-school children will be able to return to education.**

Which educational pathway is best for your child?

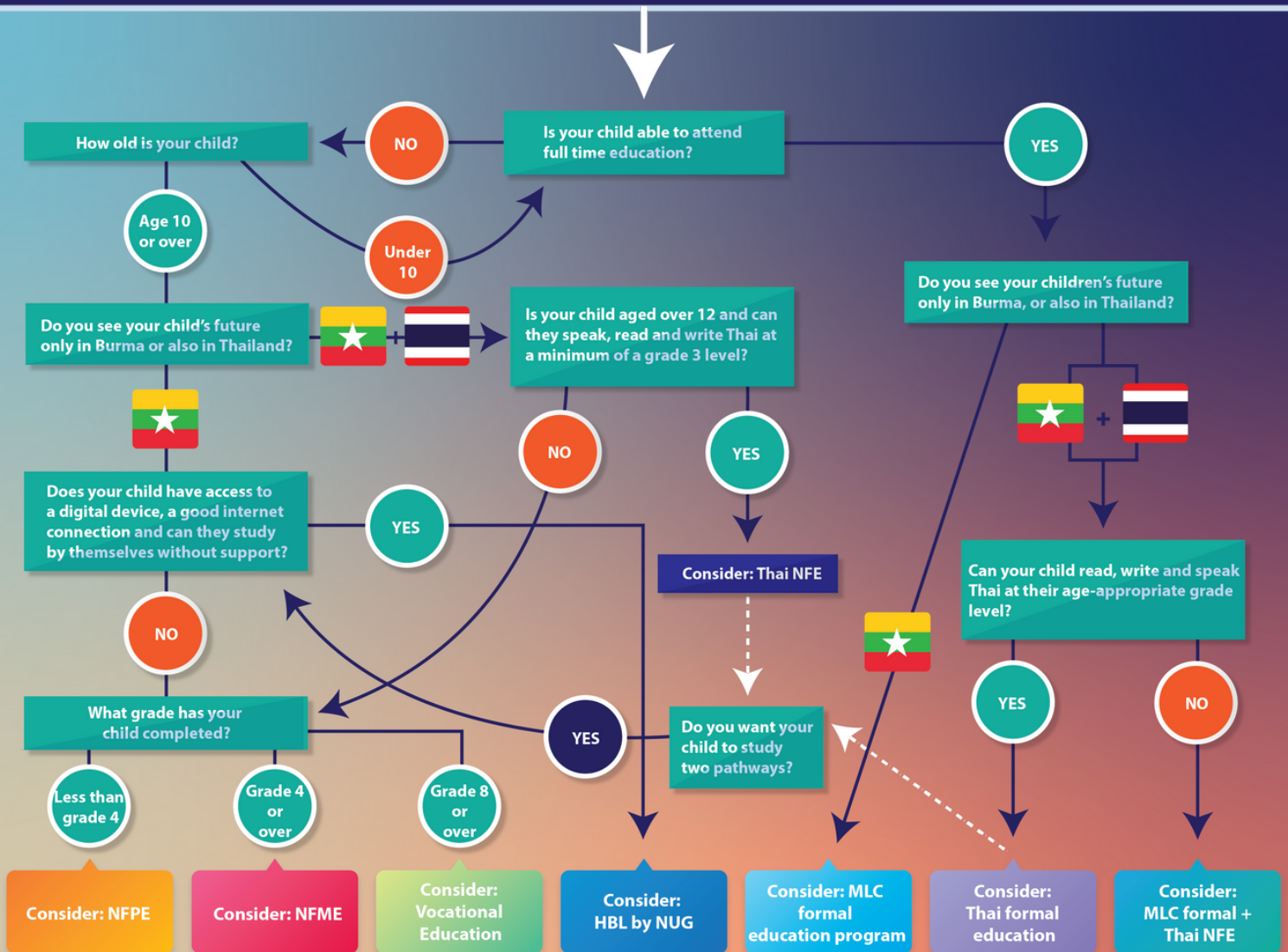


Figure 2: Educational Pathway Decision Map

“I would like the students to keep studying in any way that makes their life better. For example, for the students who want to study at a university in Burma, they need to finish high school in Burma and for those who want to study internationally, they need to study for a GED or TOFEL qualification.”

- NFPE School Director



1.3 Investing in NFPE/NFME

It is an oft repeated maxim throughout education in emergencies literature that the Chinese symbol for crisis consists of two characters – danger and opportunity (Charland et al. 2021). Although the existing NFPE/NFME pathways are in danger of losing accreditation and funding, there may be opportunities within the crisis. **If the existing NFPE/NFME programs are unable to continue in their current format, it may be appropriate for the resources and expertise from the NFPE/NFME ecosystem to pivot towards offering tailored supplementary programs that support migrant learners in alternative pathways.**



For example, for NFPE/NFME learners who wish to join the Thai government systems, additional classes could offer Thai language support and support with subject content in Burmese language. These additional classes would also enable NFPE/NFME students to maintain their current social support networks and receive supplementary schooling in Burmese literacy and culture.

To guide NFPE/NFME stakeholders on potential reform of existing pathways, this research conducted supplementary analysis of practices and policies drawing upon the latest research into NFE best practices in crisis and conflict affected contexts. (INEE, 2021).

Principles of Practice	Principles of Policy
Ensure that the design and delivery of NFE programming is inclusive and protective.	Embed NFE programming within the national education architecture.
Build flexibility into NFE programs in terms of time, location, and delivery modality.	Remove administrative and financial barriers to accessing NFE opportunities.
Ensure that NFE programs are relevant to the needs of out-of-school youth and adolescents.	Include post-primary skills and facilitate the transition from NFE to formal education, post-primary education, or livelihood opportunities.
Design holistic NFE programming that addresses health, peacebuilding, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and livelihood opportunities for youth and adolescents.	Certify NFE programs.
Promote the participation of youth and adolescents in the design and implementation of NFE programming.	Ensure sustainable financing for NFE programming.

Annex 1 Synthesizes existing literature into NFE best practices (INEE, 2021) and sets out a series of contextualized guiding questions for NFPE/NFME providers to consider during design and delivery of programming.

Annex 2 presents a broad-based analysis of the current NFPE/NFME programs through the lens constructed in Annex 1.

The broad-based analysis provided by this research suggests that prior to COVID-19 and the Burmese political crisis, NFPE/NFME programs for migrant children strongly reflected best practice principles, however these twin crises have dramatically undermined the policy environment in which teachers undertake their work.

Current NFPE/NFME programs are largely inclusive and protective (Principle of Practice 1). It was clear from across the research that NFPE/NFME providers are acutely aware of the needs of their learners and local communities; timetables, locations and delivery modality are frequently adapted to meet their needs. COVID-19 restrictions have drastically impacted on teachers' ability to deliver education in a flexible manner but has also equipped teachers with new skills enabling them to provide distance and blended learning (Principle of Practice 2).

Students frequently recounted the extent to which they appreciated the unique NFPE/NFME curriculum, and although they would appreciate even more vocational and practical training, some NFPE/NFME providers are already looking at ways to meet these needs. **Overall, NFPE/NFME is highly relevant to the needs of out-of-school youth and adolescents (Principle of Practice 3).**

In addition to providing analysis, this study looks to amplify children and parents voices to support teachers and school directors with integrating their perspectives into participatory program design and implementation (Principle of Practice 5).

The single area of practice that holds potential for improvement is that of holistic programming (Principle of Practice 4). Should the NFPE/NFME ecosystem receive sufficient external support to sustain the existing systems, and build capacity for any future migrant influx, the system may benefit from additional focus on integrating health, peacebuilding, MHPSS and social emotional well-being competencies.

The loss of integration with Burma's national education architecture (Policy Principle 1), and the subsequent loss of financial and administrative support (Policy Principle 2) and accreditation (Policy Principle 4) prevents NFPE/NFME graduates from transitioning to further education opportunities in Burma (Policy Principle 3) as well as fatally undermining NFPE/NFME sustainability (Policy Principle 5).

These policy environment barriers are long-standing issues within the migrant education ecosystem. The establishment of NFPE/NFME systems were a major milestone in addressing these challenges and improving access to quality education for migrant children from Burma in Thailand. **The loss of the NFPE/NFME pathways will set back migrant education by a decade.**

A situational analysis of non-formal educational pathways for migrant children in Tak Province

The NFPE / NFME pathways may never be the same again, but the lessons learned by education providers, teachers, school directors, parents and children articulated in this report underscore six key messages:

1. NFPE/NFME for migrant children in Tak province has been a resounding success story.
2. The NFPE/NFME system is needed now more than ever.
3. External support is needed now, more than ever.
4. NFPE/NFME is not only worth saving, but scaling.
5. Accredited, accelerated, flexible, inclusive and practical pathways are highly valued characteristics of a safety net for out-of-school children.
6. Investment can save and strengthen an established system, or build upon firm foundations to innovate and improve a one-of-a-kind educational pathway.

Within the ongoing education emergency on the Thai-Burma border, the immediate and urgent needs of NFPE/NFME providers are loud and clear:



Resources and Financing



Teacher Training



Support with Accreditation



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve the Accessibility of Thai NFE (Kor Sor Nor) for Non-Thai Children and Youth: During this difficult time, migrant parents who have lived and worked in Thailand for multiple years are increasingly seeking education options for their children that are accredited in Thailand. The KSN entrance exam requires Thai language proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing at approximately a grade 3 level. This language barrier prevents migrant children from accessing this nationally accredited non-formal pathway. Pre-KSN programs for children with low Thai literacy levels are needed to bridge this critical gap. These could be stand-alone programs or integrated with the current MLC curriculum.

Thai Back-to-School Campaign: In the current environment, it appears Thai schools will be able to resume face-to-face learning prior to the migrant education systems. This research has highlighted how migrant parents, and more importantly – children’s priorities are changing. Many intend to remain in Thailand longer than they originally intended. A large scale ‘back-to-school’ campaign reminiscent of campaigns run in the past which specifically targets migrant children would widen the safety net and bring more children back to school. This would also mitigate some of the damage done by COVID-19 towards Thailand’s efforts to meet its Sustainable Development Goals and Education for All commitments.

Anticipatory Action and Financing - This research forecasts that accredited, accelerated, flexible, inclusive and practical pathways such as the NFPE/NFME system are likely to be in increased demand in the foreseeable future . This report presents an early warning, in line with contemporary best practice research into crisis sensitive education planning. Further research is required to identify triggers. Immediate action is required to develop pre-arranged action plans and pre-arranged financing in order to protect children’s learning and well-being needs in the highly likely event of escalating demand in the coming years.

Explore Alternative Accredited Education Opportunities – Quality education is not defined by accreditation, however, accreditation drives quality and brings greater opportunities to students. The loss of accreditation due the paradigm-shifting Burmese political crisis has been severely felt by all stakeholders. Further exploration is required to examine whether widely recognized international accreditation systems could be introduced. The International General Certificate of Secondary Education (iGCSE) is one such option that should be explored.

Expand the “2-Track Models” - Some participating Migrant Learning Centers provided their students with another recognized educational pathway alongside of their Myanmar formal curriculum: either Myanmar Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) or Thai Government Non-Formal Education (NFE). These multi-pathway models work to ensure children can continue their education in both Thailand and Myanmar. After-school or night-study options are possibilities for over-age children or youth who are working. Resources are needed to scale these comprehensive models, specifically hiring Thai NFE teachers.

BEYOND THE BORDER, BEYOND TODAY.

The February 2021 Burmese political crisis has upended an established order and forced millions of parents to make difficult decisions regarding their children's educational futures - decisions nobody expected to or wanted to make.

Today, in Tak province Thailand, the education of 251 children hangs in the balance. Parents facing already uncertain futures filled with difficult decisions are being confronted with questions that were supposed to be settled. For most there will no choice at all, but rather a careful calculation between the least worst options. The eleven NFPE/NFME service providers in Tak province, their teachers, and their school directors have made it clear throughout their responses in this research that they are doing everything in their power to mitigate the damage being inflicted. Without financial, administrative, and logistical support, their influence is limited.

However, the issues explored in this report reach further than the border and beyond the immediate crisis. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 3,500 migrant children have disappeared from educational records and have joined the ranks of the invisible out of school migrant children in Thailand. The findings in this report suggest the NFPE/NFME safety net would be well placed to catch them.

The economic, political, and security situation in Burma shows no sign of improvement, and as Thailand's economy bounces back from the COVID-19 pandemic, legal migration to Thailand is expected to increase. **Children crossing into Thailand from Myanmar in the coming years will have missed at least two years of formal education, and will likely bring with them diverse and complex learning needs.**

To a regional and global audience, this report provides a case-study highlighting the importance and power of non-formal education pathways as a safety net for disadvantaged and vulnerable children. Although not addressed within this research, the questions of accredited education also apply to the thousands of children enrolled within the MLC formal education system throughout Thailand, and beyond the border to the millions of out of school children in Burma. **Solutions piloted to address the immediate and urgent needs of the 251 NFPE/NFME students in Tak province today hold the potential to shape the futures of thousands more children, on both sides of the border, tomorrow.**





Voices from non-formal education in Tak province

"I don't know what to say about how the situation effects my kids' future. I am speechless. I planned to go back Burma before, but now I am lost. Which way do I choose?" - NFPE Parent

"Will school reopen again? I am getting old. What will I have to do? work?" - NFPE Student

"I don't want my kids to be like me - without education." - NFPE Parent

"The students in the NFPE program have lost their rights. NFPE teachers have lost their salaries. We feel small. Our students ask, when the school will reopen? We can only tell them they will get to attend school again" - NFPE School Director





This research was conducted in collaboration by **TeacherFOCUS** and **Help without Frontiers Thailand Foundation (HwF)**.

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