



# Migrant cultural capital accumulation amid the first COVID-19 shock: Shan children in Chiang Mai municipal schools, Thailand

Nongyao Nawarat<sup>a</sup>, Pisith Nasee<sup>a,\*</sup>, Michael Medley<sup>b,†</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Division of Social Science Education, Faculty of Education, Research Center for Multiculturalism and Education Policy, Multidisciplinary Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand

<sup>b</sup> Center for Social Development Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

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## Abstract

Among the measures taken by Thailand's government in 2020 in response to the first wave of the Covid-19 epidemic was the closure of schools for the months of May and June that year, and a scheme of distance-learning for the students instead. The present study examines the impact of this crisis and the education policy response on a group of teenage students who were children of Shan migrant workers in inner-city Chiang Mai, and their nuclear families. It is based on interviews with the students, their parents, and teachers or principals from their respective schools. The questioning was influenced by previous studies of migrants in Thailand, and a theoretical framework involving Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of cultural capital; it was supposed that the students and their families would attempt to protect the children's acquisition of cultural capital in the face of an exogenous shock to their household economy. The interviews helped illuminate how far this was the case, and the ways in which it happened. Further, in contrasting the student experiences with the way in which the distance-learning measures were announced by the Minister of Education, the paper provides evidence about ways in which modern technology solutions can overlook children's individual learning needs, and create new disadvantages for poorer students, particularly the children of inner-city migrant workers.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [pisith.nasee@cmu.ac.th](mailto:pisith.nasee@cmu.ac.th) (P. Nasee).

† Co-first authors.

E-mail address: [mmedley@gmail.com](mailto:mmedley@gmail.com) (M. Medley).

## Introduction

The following article reports a study centering on 13 Shan migrant children enrolled in eleven municipal schools in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, and how they fared in the initial COVID-19 emergency response period in the months of April to June 2020. It particularly focuses on whether and how they and their close households experienced the event as a shock to their families' long-term aims and plans.

These 13 students were selected using a purposive method. They form a tight cohort whose experience exemplifies specific dynamics, dynamics which may resonate in various ways with overlapping groups and other groups worldwide. A key characteristic of this cohort is the position of its members in very fragile transition between one national identity and another. In this respect they bear comparison with “dreamer” youths in the USA (Olivas & Richardson, 2020) and the younger ones among survival migrants documented by Alexander Betts and others especially in African countries (Betts, 2010, 2013). As with most members of these groups, our participants were subject to great legal and economic precarity.

We studied what happened to the students and their families during the first wave of Covid-19 in mid-2020 by listening to the accounts of these 13 children and triangulating them with those of their parents and some of their teachers and school leaders. While trying to remain open to the subjective experiences of the key informants, and their own interpretations, we found an overall lens in Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997), coming to see how the interviewees' stories could often be framed in terms of a struggle to continue building this capital. In the final appraisal we also drew on literature of disaster shocks in a political economy perspective order to suggest policy lessons.

## Literature Review

### *Shan Migrants in Chiang Mai*

Chiang Mai is the largest city in the Northern region of Thailand, having been established as a major trade hub between southern China, Laos, Myanmar and Bangkok long before its incorporation into the kingdom of Siam (now Thailand) in the late 19th century (Ongsakun et al., 2005). Chiang Mai's economy has benefited from cheap labor migrating from neighboring countries,

notably since an influx in the late 1990s (Boonlert, 2009). According to the statistics of the Foreign Workers Administration Office in Chiang Mai, in August 2020 over 100,000 migrant workers were officially employed throughout Chiang Mai. There are also thought to be many others working without legal documentation. The migrants predominantly fill low-wage jobs in the construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and domestic service sectors. Such workers often reside in temporary camps provided by their employers, accompanied by their children from Myanmar (Jirattikorn, 2008, pp. 79–80). However, families of migrant workers in metropolitan areas such as Chiang Mai have begun to live more independently, doing jobs they find as individuals, or setting up as small traders on their own account, which they are not legally entitled to do.

Most of these migrant workers in Chiang Mai are of Shan ethnicity and have come in the current or last generation from Shan State in Myanmar. Shan State is a locus of chronic political and military conflict, illicit drug production, economic dysfunction and humanitarian disaster (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2019; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2021, p. 14). Of those who seek to leave, many could be seen as falling in Betts' (2010) category of “survival migrants”; they cannot practically become refugees, as Thailand is not signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. It should be noted, however, that Shan communities have existed in northern Thailand for many decades, both in rural and urban environments; some of their members are Thailand citizens in law, but some are among the hundreds of thousands of people in Thailand with undetermined citizenship, who are effectively stateless. The Thai and Shan ethnicities are often said in Thailand to be closely related (Ferguson, 2021; Harkins, 2019, p. 11). Thailand does not offer a clear path to citizenship for the migrant workers, however long they may have lived in the country. But since 2017 an offer of Thai citizenship has been open to those who have resided continuously in the country for at least 15 years and gained a bachelor's degree (Government of Thailand Ministry of Interior, 2017).

### *Schooling Obstacles and the Importance of Cultural Capital*

Although the government of Thailand has officially endorsed the principle that all children should be offered schooling free of charge and irrespective of nationality documentation (Chantavanich, 2007), the costs in terms

of clothing, equipment, transportation etc. put a severe demand on the household economies of low-paid migrant workers, even where the workplace is close enough to an available school to make it at all practical. Probably fewer than half of the migrant children in Thailand are attending schools (Harkins, 2019, p. 104). In Chiang Mai city, however, there is evidence of relatively high migrant school enrollment, amid a high concentration of schools of different kinds reachable through urban transportation services (Nawarat, 2018). Children attend these schools despite the fact that it would be hard for them later to transfer to the Myanmar school system, as, in addition to differences in the language of study, there is a lack of alignment between the respective curricula and accreditation systems (Nawarat, 2018, p. 2). However, an investment in education within Thailand's school and university system, leading to Thai citizenship, is the most significant and perhaps only opportunity for social mobility and economic stability of the second-generation children.

The importance of schooling for these migrant children may be seen through the lens of a Bourdieusian concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu developed this concept—alongside those of economic capital and social capital—to analyze the persistence of social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1997). Given that capital in general is private power derived from accumulated labour, cultural capital consists of acquired attributes that give an individual the prestige of being recognized as a cultivated person, with all the advantages this brings, whether embodied (as personal capacities and dispositions), objectified (as possession of books and other material cultural tools) or institutionalized (as formal qualifications especially education). Although an individual needs to work on themselves and within formal education institutions to accumulate embodied cultural capital, this task is typically easier if parents and other close ones are well-endowed with appropriate cultural capital themselves. Differentials of advantage and disadvantage are thus transmitted from one generation to the next through cultural capital as well as through economic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1997, pp. 47–51, 55). Bourdieu contended that wealthy families, threatened by the potential egalitarianism of democratically-accountable states, maintained their advantage of power and privilege partly by converting economic capital into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997, pp. 53–55). Extending this thought, middle- and working-class citizens might also enjoy, in nativist cultural capital, a defence against the feared economic challenge of migrants.

Indeed, the concept of cultural capital has been used in several previous academic studies of migrants internationally (e.g., Barglowski, 2019; Coe & Shani, 2015; Erel, 2010). Migrants face the special challenge of turning cultural capital gathered in one locale into a different mix of cultural capital that will be of more value in their new situation. Children of migrants will be helped by formal schooling (if they can access it), but, compared with local children, their learning in the host environment is likely to be less assisted by the cultural capital of their parents in respect of curriculum content and the language of instruction. However, studies have confirmed a wide perception that migrant families often endow children with valuable cultural capital in terms of optimism and high aspirations (Barglowski, 2019).

### *The role of Shocks in Household Ability to survive and thrive*

The role of periodic shocks in reinforcing poverty and inequality was widely discussed in a body of academic literature in the 1990s and early 2000s (Lipton & Ravallion, 1993; Morduch, 1994; Holzmann & Jørgensen, 2001). A shock—whether from a widespread disaster or the immediate contingency of a job loss or personal health crisis—is liable to affect a poor family more deeply than a richer one, because the former has fewer fungible assets to act as a cushion. A shock in one year may negate many years of gradual self-improvement, by forcing a resort to desperate coping mechanisms, such as eating less nutritious food, postponing health treatment, selling productive assets—and cutting back on education spending (Holzmann & Jørgensen, 2001, pp. 534–536). The present study was therefore concerned to investigate whether the cohort of Shan students and their families were affected by the coming of COVID-19, and its effects on schools, as a significant shock, and, if so, in what ways they felt and responded to it.

### *The governmental response to COVID-19 in early 2020*

In response to the first wave of the pandemic, Thailand's government issued an emergency decree on 26 March 2020, mandating restrictions on schools and many other institutions throughout the country and imposing severe limitations on inter-and intra-national travel (Sirilak, 2020). For schools, the restrictions prohibited the use of their buildings and facilities for teaching, training or any other activities involving a plurality of participants, except for long-distance or electronic learning. The ban announcement was

made during the school vacation, and meant that schools did not open, as previously scheduled, on 16th May. For the second half of May and the month of June, the Ministry of Education envisaged that students should receive an alternative form of education in their homes, based on remote and online learning policies

The remote-learning policy was able to build on foundations established before the Covid-19 crisis. A Distance Learning Foundation had been established under the patronage of King Rama IX in 1996. It had originally been directed toward certain border areas of Thailand, where schools were run by the border patrol police and where the availability of well-qualified teachers was severely limited. In the original scheme, children would sit in their classroom with a television at the front, showing a teacher delivering a lesson. The Ministry of Education later extended the scheme to other schools that otherwise would have difficulty providing suitable teaching. When digital television became available, the Ministry used three digital channels. During the first wave emergency, it quickly produced additional programmes and increased the number of channels to 17. It used two main broadcasting technologies: digital television through the government's Distance Learning Television service (DLTV), and internet-based applications. Lesson videos became available through Ministry websites as well as digital television, and the number of videos was quickly increased. The two-pronged (digital TV and internet) online learning broadcasts first had a test run on 18 May 2020. After that, the broadcasts provided teaching of all subjects and for all levels using a fixed schedule eight hours per day, similar to daily school schedule (Ministry of Education, 2020).

For primary-level students (Grades 1 to 6) the emergency strategy was based on "one-way education" using television broadcasts also available on the internet, and also to include learning exercises and homework (Teepsuwan, 2020). At the secondary school level (Grades 7 to 12), there was to be a "two-way communication approach", partly using DLTV, but also calling for more interactive support to students from teachers by means of online platforms (*ibid.*). The Minister of Education elaborated that he expected parents or guardians to "assume the role of teachers' assistants to help their children learn" (*ibid.*). The Minister added that he saw the crisis as an opportunity to further integrate ICT (information and communications technology) in the education system (*ibid.*). This was desirable partly to meet students' future needs in the digital age, but also for direct application in educational governance. In the immediate period of the emergency, he considered

that distance-learning broadcasts would leave all teachers with time to "adjust and fine tune their ICT skills and competencies for present and future use", and that the crisis was also an opportunity to "take stock of our learners' skills in learning online" (*ibid.*). This would facilitate a shift to online modalities which, in the long term, would enable more comprehensive data-collection and centralized monitoring of the performances of both students and teachers, providing the potential to target assistance appropriately. The present study is concerned with the Covid-19 first wave period when schools and students were attempting to use remote learning.

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## Methodology

The field research was conducted during August and September 2021. It applied a mixed method for data collection, comprised of a semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation.

The study began from the intention to qualitatively study the experiences of Shan second-generation migrant children and their nuclear families in inner-city Chiang Mai. There are children of other migrant ethnicities in Chiang Mai, but far fewer, and it was decided not to try to cover or represent them. Given this intention, the researchers proceeded to access key informants through the 11 municipality-administered basic education schools in Chiang Mai ("Basic education" in the Thai context means primary- and secondary-level education), because this is where almost all the migrant Shan children attend school. While there are more than 50 basic education schools in Chiang Mai municipal area, only 11 of them fall under the direct responsibility of the Chiang Mai municipal government, and hence the national Ministry of the Interior. All of the latter are in the downtown area. The other schools are supervised by Educational Service Area administrations under the Ministry of Education, 24 of them being public schools and the remainder private schools.

The municipal schools are schools that did not transfer to Ministry of Education support and supervision following the 1999 Education Act and national administrative reform process of the early 2000s. It is thought that a reason for their not transferring was the inability of these schools and their staff to meet the quality standards required by the Ministry of Education, that this reputation for lower quality persists, and that these schools tend to serve children of poorer and more disadvantaged families. The reason that the municipality schools were chosen was that this was where almost all the inner-city Shan migrant school children were in attendance.

The eleven selected schools were mostly small (from 66 to 120 children), and only three were middling in size, ranging between 120 and 500 children. Eight out of the 11 covered kindergarten level to Grade 6. The other three had junior high school sections (Grades 7 to 9). The study focused on Grades 6 and 9 because these are crucial junctures for students in which exam results determine their options and greatly determine whether they can get into high-standard schools at the next level of education. Initially, two Shan students were asked to volunteer from each of these classes through their teachers, using their online chat groups in the Line app. In this way, 22 volunteers were initially found. However, after the researchers explained to them that they would like also to interview their parents, some of these volunteers withdrew. We settled for a group consisting of ten Grade 6 students—covering all eight primary schools, and three Grade 9 students taken from the schools with junior high sections: 13 students in total. The Grade 6 students were aged 11–13, and consisted of six girls and four boys. The Grade 9 students were aged 16–17, and consisted of one girl and two boys. The students were interviewed in the Thai language, in which they were all proficient for this purpose. The fact that the interviewees were partly self-selected does necessitate some additional refinement in understanding the nature of the group of student key informants; we supposed that some of the Shan students in the schools may have been less confident in Thai language, possibly as a result of being (unlike our interviewees) born in Myanmar, and that they may be less committed or less able to see their long-term futures as being in Thailand.

Besides the students, there were two other groups of key informants: the parents of the selected students, and one teacher from each of the 11 schools. Using Thai language to interview the parents was considered the most practical option. Most of the parents could speak Thai, having been in Thailand for a long time. However, the school child would be present and would occasionally act as a translator. Of the teachers interviewed, two were principals of their schools (both male). Of the nine other teachers interviewed, seven were female. The choice to interview representatives of the educational institutions was made in order to help detect paradoxes and bias in data from children and families, making the research data more reliable.

The interviews were semi-structured, based on separate lists of starter-questions for the school leaders, the students and the parents respectively. The school leaders were interviewed in the schools. The students and their parents were interviewed in their homes, usually in the presence of other household members. The questioning was

influenced by the previous studies of migrants in Thailand, and the literature in which the idea of cultural capital is applied to migrants' household economies: a hypothesis being that the students and their families would attempt to protect the children's acquisition of cultural capital in the face of an exogenous shock to their household economy.

The research plan and sample questions were approved by the Chiang Mai University Research Ethics Committee in May 2021, before the fieldwork started. In accordance with guidelines, personal information of the informants has been kept confidential.

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## Results

### *Interviewees' Livelihood Experiences and Responses during the Crisis*

All 13 of the interviewed children had been born in Thailand. All lived in a household with two parents and up to two siblings. On average, the parents were 37 years old and had lived in Thailand for at least 20 years, earning their livelihoods mainly in Chiang Mai and its suburbs.

The interviews and visits to the key informants' families mostly took place at their residences which were built with cheap materials and situated behind big buildings, accessed by small rough paths. The type of accommodation was *hōr pāk* (Thai: หอพัก): a single rented room for the family in a dormitory block. These rooms typically measured around 3 by 4 meters and came with a private bathroom. Additionally, there was a small cooking space adjacent to the bathroom. Inside the room, all family members slept together on thin mattresses. Out of 13 families, 2 had recently taken in another family to share cost of the *hōr pāk* with friends and relatives, so in each case there were two rooms occupied by two families with four members each. The adult female in one of them—who was the mother of one of the Grade 9 student interviewees—expressed this as a coping strategy or a survival strategy. “Our cousin [the co-habitor] lost her job after a month of the outbreak and our income also disappeared suddenly. But we need to live right here as this place is not too far from the school and the work place of my husband and myself.” (This mother is a hotel cleaner while her husband is a security worker doing night shifts.) The room was too small for four people, but if the cousin could not find a new job in a short time, she would leave to stay with her parents' family in a border village. This sharing was a result of daily earnings having dropped drastically. The range of room rental prices was 2,500–3,000 Thai Baht (equivalent to about 71–86 US Dollars).



Regarding the impact of the COVID-19 first wave on the families of key informants in terms of employment, we found the parents' occupations could be classified in three groups. The first group was of six self-employed vendors (of cooked food, vegetables, flowers and small items), who used to earn a monthly income ranging from 50,000 to 60,000 Thai Baht (equivalent to approximately 1,400 to 1,700 US Dollars). The second group comprised six parents in three family couples. They held relatively stable positions as cleaners, working in hotels and dormitories as cleaners and security staff. These two-wage households reported a typical monthly income between 16,000 and 22,000 Thai Baht (about 460 to 630 US Dollars) before the outbreak started. The third group also contained six parents, though not in family couples. These were daily-paid workers with consistently recurring employers, filling roles such as gas station cleaners and providing additional services such as oil filling, car washing, and refueling machine operation, earning approximately 16,000 to 20,000 Thai Baht per month (about 460 to 570 US Dollars). Lastly, there were eight parents who were engaged in more casual day labor, primarily in porter duties at the market. All the male workers were hired for physically demanding tasks, including cart pushing and goods transportation, while female workers were employed for meticulous tasks such as vegetable washing, tying, plucking, flipping, and preparing produce for sale in the markets. Key informants in the fourth group reported a monthly income before the outbreak ranging from 15,000 to 18,000 Thai Baht (about 430 to 520 US Dollars).

The economic shock to these households during the first-wave COVID-19 crisis was severe. Most of the daily-paid workers were reduced to three or fewer days of work in the week; at least 7 of the 26 parents became unemployed; and the takings of the small businesses collapsed to about a fifth of their normal level. In this situation, most drew down their small savings as well as reducing their expenses in order to survive in Thailand.

At the same time, their basic expenses were increased in most cases by the need to buy protective masks and hand sanitizer; even though the actual numbers of reported infections in Chiang Mai Province were very low, they took the risk of infection extremely seriously, believing that, aside from health impact, testing positive for COVID-19 would result in unemployment and then deportation.

The Chiang Mai municipality had no policy on health personal protective equipment support for migrant workers living in the municipality. Religious communities

gave some charitable help, such as donating rice, dry food, eggs, and hygiene masks, but still focusing on helping in the Thai community at large. Thus, only seven of the 13 families reported having received between one and three food relief packages worth about 500 Thai Baht each, from temples or other voluntary donation schemes; as migrants, they were not generally eligible for government-provided relief. One of mothers who was a casual worker said: "We are not Thai.... We had to stand at the end of a line. We would get something if there were leftovers, but going often made me feel embarrassed."

The importance of the child's education was strongly affirmed by representatives of eleven of the 13 households, who spoke of the desirability of fitting in better in Thailand. The other two did not respond clearly but expressed that their children love studying and their school, and playing with friends. While some of these adults referred to short- or medium-term benefits, such as the help children could give their parents in translating and writing Thai language, the majority showed that they hoped their child could build a more prosperous life in Thailand than appeared available to them in Myanmar. One mentioned that they had no land in Myanmar, and another that, after many years in Thailand, they no longer had any family or friends in Myanmar who could help them if they returned. It was notable that, beside academic qualifications, the parents emphasized the social integration of their children: learning to speak Thai "with a good accent", "to be like others", "to be accepted by Thais", to be "good and respectable."

Maybe with growing up in a big city and being born in Thailand, the 13 children had more imaginative ambitions for themselves and their education than those their parents spoke of for them. For the children, education prepared them for being Thai citizens with Shan ethnicity and advanced professional careers. Education was inspiration for them, as could be seen through their words. The children, when asked about their hopes for the future, made no mention of a possible life in Myanmar. One of the three Grade 9 students said: "To get a university degree is my first dream." The other two grade 9 students (one boy, one girl) wanted to go on to vocational studies in Chiang Mai and then get an office job. Among the Grade 6 students, four were focused on doing well enough in year-end examinations to get into a good-quality (non-municipal) high-school and go to university and colleges. In terms of jobs, one boy stated confidently "I want to be a doctor", and one girl wished "to be a nurse or TV episode actor",

and several boys and girls dreamed of being musicians, actors or singers when they completed Grade 12. Quite positively none of the study key informants expected to drop out of education and their school. One of the interviewees said: “My teacher always affirmed that I am a good student because I work hard at my studies. She will not fail me in the exam.”

### *Interviewees’ experiences and responses to Emergency Online Learning*

From our observations and interviews, at the start of the emergency, none of the studied families owned a digital television set of the kind required for receiving DLTV. During the emergency period, one family (one of the two small business owners, with a Grade 9 student) purchased such a digital set, primarily so it could be used to receive DLTV. None of children interviewed had useful access to a computer or a tablet. At the same time, none of the families was able to increase very much their online learning capital, for example by buying a smart phone or improving their internet connection, although they expressed wishes to do so.

Mobile phones were the most useful electronic device for distance learning, but this usefulness was limited. The cost of a 3G or 4G phone internet connection capable of supporting six to eight hours of learning each day for one student was at least 500 Thai Baht (about 14 US Dollars) per month. (A landline internet connection could have worked out a little cheaper, especially if shared, but would have required an annual contract, which was a risky and difficult investment for families that had no permanent address and often moved home.) Affording this amount of money was not always impossible, but it was usually very difficult for these families, especially in the time of economic difficulty and uncertainty. The interviewed school staff estimated that it was only 15–20 percent of students who owned a smartphone, but almost all students in Grade 9 had their own smartphone. Exploring this type of learning resource among our ten key informants in Grade 6, it was found that none of the interviewees owned smartphones.

The interviewed teachers reported that they contacted these groups of students by using the students’ parents’ mobile phones, using the Line application. This did not need to be done very often, as the form of distance approach used for teaching and learning was that students were asked to collect study materials from teachers at the school and then hand the works back to the teachers within a week or every two weeks. According to students, they only met the teachers one time: for some this was in

late May and for others in early June. According to some of the teachers, they had spent their personal money preparing documents for study at home by photocopying textbooks, workbooks and other assignments

The three Grade 9 informants each had their own smartphone with a top up budget of 100–150 Baht a month. They used phones for accessing learning materials and homework from their teachers and for receiving DLTV Programs. The usefulness of the latter was limited by the fact that the broadcasts were on a fixed schedule and could not be replayed. A student interviewee told us: “I couldn’t understand my lesson online, because things went fast. We can’t go back and listen again. It gave me anxiety and so I just started playing games with the smartphone.” Others said it was difficult to study with a smartphone compared with a computer, due to small screens, and limited battery life. This difficulty was increased in some cases when a phone was being used jointly with a friend in order to reduce costs, despite the COVID-19 transmission risk involved.

In terms of the use of online platforms: despite the Government’s provision to schools of subscriptions for video-meeting and course-management platforms, the school representatives in both levels reported that they found it hard to make use of these because of their students’ lack of digital tools at home. Only in the one junior high school did one of the teachers use a video-meeting application and this was not a government-subscribed one, but Facebook Live. The teacher chose this because this application was already familiar to students and their families, and thus more likely to be used effectively. This is according to information provided by the school representative. However, one of the students among our key informants who studied in this school affirmed that only one teacher teaching science created the digital interactive learning class with students. The three Grade 9 students all expressed a deep anxiety that they did not have proper teaching and learning.

The absence of face-to-face contact was felt as a great difficulty. The 9th Graders, in particular, found the combination of blocked teaching and lack of social contact very frustrating and stressful as they approached a crucial set of examinations, as they believed the schools would not let them repeat the same class. The 6th Grade children who had received one-time hard-copy learning materials said they found them difficult to use when they lacked quick access to teachers or friends to motivate and help them understand. One said: “My house has no digital TV. But I couldn’t understand my teachers’ requirements

and the lessons. I am very tense and anxious because I couldn't understand my lesson. I want the school to be open, so I can play with friends.” We asked all 13 children about the parental help they had received; none of the parents had been able to give academic assistance, and just two of the Grade 6 students received some help from siblings. Interviews with the parents corroborated this: they said they just tried their best to help in supporting their child by providing food, protecting them from health risk by discouraging social interaction which would have posed a health risk, and by giving emotional support such as reducing their stress by talking with them. The parents placed high hopes on the school managing to recover the academic loss for the child.

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## Discussion

The interviews and observations show a resolute commitment in all the families to an investment in the children's future; an investment which appeared implicitly to aim toward a life in Thailand, perhaps by way of a bachelor's degree and the award of Thai citizenship.

The means of investment is capital. Applying a filter of Bourdieu's sub-categories of cultural capital—embodied, objectified and institutionalized capital—to what was observed in the schools and homes, and said in the interviews, helps to focus this material. The importance accorded by the parents to speaking Thai “with a good accent”, to being “like others”, “accepted by Thais” and “good and respectable”—corroborated by researchers' observations that the children took an active part in school life, giving an impression that they had as much self-confidence and sense of agency as most Thai children—corresponds with what Bourdieu meant by embodied cultural capital: personal qualities that can only be reached through a long period of work on the self (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 48). For Bourdieu, the value of cultural capital was largely as “a precondition for the fast, easy accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital” and the need for it conferred an advantage on the children of families where it already existed and could be passed on, beginning in infancy (p. 49). The Shan parents in our study, then, seemed to be expressing anxiety that their own stock of cultural capital, formed largely in a rural Shan context, was inadequate for their children. This makes sense in the context of Thailand's cultural exclusivity and centralism in which the Thai state has long treated migrants with expulsion or marginalization if they did not become well-assimilated

(Trautongyoo, 2008). The parents therefore expressed that they could merely provide a basis of material, prudential and psychological support, while hoping that the Thai schooling process would help their children to catch up.

The way the majority of the children answered the question about hopes for the future—in terms of academic qualifications—relates, by contrast, more clearly to Bourdieu's category of institutionalised cultural capital. The difference in emphasis between parents and children when talking about their hopes—the former placing more stress on the basics of embodied cultural capital, and the latter on high targets in institutionalised cultural capital—seems to reflect a universal trope of innocence versus experience. Perhaps what is most significant is that the children did not express the same kinds of worries as their parents about “not fitting in”. The testimonies of the teachers seemed to have supported their confidence in this respect; indeed, the difference between the migrant children and their Thai peers in the municipal schools was reported to be that the former exceeded the latter in terms of the traditional virtues of being hard-working, attentive and obedient.

The notion of objectified cultural capital—which Bourdieu saw as the means of accessing from humanity's amassed knowledge the relevant information needed to make economic capital capable of production (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 50)—can be applied to the mobile phones, computers and television sets, and also the subscriptions to data transmission services and access rights to digital content, that were crucial to implementing the government's emergency education measures. Access to a school, too, may be seen as objectified cultural capital.

Thus, the shock of the first wave of Covid-19, and its disruption of schooling, exposed the weakness of the children's objectified cultural capital, which caused an interruption in their accumulation of embodied and potentially of institutionalised cultural capital. The families, unable to buy the increases in objectified cultural capital suggested by government policy (computers, better phones and televisions), tried at least to protect the most important forms of it they possessed—the school enrolment enabled by inner-city and basic smartphone connections—despite a sharp reduction in income. To do this, most of the families made sacrifices in terms of basic comfort (e.g., by sharing accommodation, suffering the indignity and boredom of queuing for relief) as well as by drawing down their reserves.

It was not unexpected to find that the children in our study suffered educationally during the COVID-19



emergency; in many other countries it has been reported that attempts by governments to use online learning were problematic for poorer students who lacked powerful electronic devices and adequate internet connections (Gurr, 2020). However, it is instructive to note the extent and detail of the failure in the case of our cohort. For these students, the technology-based measures announced by the government proved mostly unfeasible during this period. Their parents generally could not fulfill the role of “teachers’ assistants”, as envisaged by the Ministry of Education, in an academic sense, since their own levels of schooling were low, and their school lesson experiences were mostly couched in the Myanmar curriculum and Burmese language. The teachers in these municipal schools were mostly unable to use this period to work on improving their ICT skills, due to shortfalls of equipment and learning resources in their schools and homes. Rather, the teachers at primary level found they had to spend time preparing written learning materials for the students.

There is a contrast between the idealized solution to the crisis initially presented by the Education Minister and the untidy practical realities. While the Minister’s vision involved well-functioning and abundant television and internet apparatus, suggesting frictionless communication, the reality for the studied Grade 6 students was that they had to travel to pick up paper copies of learning materials, and pass back handwritten assignments. While electronic apparatus was rather more effective for Grade 9 students, the concrete student experience involved interruptions due to cheap-end service plans, frustrations with battery charging and overheating handsets, and sharing small screens. Even when the electronic equipment and infrastructure worked well, the contents that it transmitted were inadequate to fully replace the functions of conventional schooling; the video and text media did not replicate the convenience in a physical classroom of asking the teacher or classmates to explain presentations in more accessible terms.

Given that our key informants were deliberately selected to investigate the experience of a less-advantaged group of students, and assuming that the Ministry of Education’s emergency education strategy would have worked better for average middle-class children who may be supposed to enjoy better-quality digital connections and devices, the study prompts reflections on the dynamics of poverty and inequality. It is clear that in the first wave Covid-19 crisis the process of cultural capital accumulation became diminished for

the Shan children and others in the municipal schools. These children very likely lost further ground compared with children who were already more educationally and economically privileged. This conforms to a wider observation in the literature that disaster shocks tend to reinforce the processes that entrench poverty (Morduch, 1994). While special protection for the vulnerable has become an established principle in transnational disaster responses and also in welfare state regimes (Holzmann & Jørgensen, 2001), the education component of the COVID-19 first wave emergency response in Thailand—as in many countries (Gurr, 2020)—largely neglected this principle. This neglect seems to have been a corollary of the public attractiveness of a solution based on technological modernization.

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## Conclusion and Recommendation

The present authors do not wish to discourage a progressive incorporation of new technology in education, but recommend that the introduction of new digital devices and modes of transmission is not done without ensuring that its content covers the needs of diverse users, and that its application does not neglect the needs of individual students for repeated hearings, and further explanations. Furthermore, the visions of what such technologies could do in the middle-future should not be allowed to distract from designing measures that can help the poor and migrants as much as wealthier citizens of Thailand.

In particular, the government should consider extending the existing package of free basic education by covering the costs of digital equipment and connections for less affluent students. At the same time, the study has also shown the trade-off for poor migrant worker households between supporting the educational progress of their children and meeting basic human needs in crisis situations. The government should make particular efforts to include migrant workers in any future emergency basic-needs relief provision.

The present study looked at only a short period at the start of the COVID-19 first wave, and focused on a very specific social group. We recommend that further academic studies be done on the continuing effects of the COVID-19 crisis in school education, looking at other and wider sections of the student population. The role of the municipality schools as distinct from Education Ministry schools also seems to merit further investigation. The present study has hopefully provided some groundwork for such researches.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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