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Multi-Lingual and Multicultural Education in Globalizing Southeast Asia

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Countries in Southeast Asia share similar characteristics in terms of ethnic and cultural diversity. Each country is rich with its population of different ethnicities, religions, and languages (Ooi & Grabowsky, 2017). To keep a balance between unity and diversity is a challenge that countries in the region commonly experience. Compared to the present time, the management of cultural diversity had not been an issue in the past. In many vassal states, ethnic groups could retain their linguistic and cultural identities. The existence of cultural diversity among tributary states helped strengthen the power of the overlords (Sattayanurak, 2016). But, in the beginning of the 19th century, this gradually changed. In Thailand, the encroachment of Western imperialism made the ruling classes to initiate nation-building projects. Since then, people of diverse ethnicities and cultures have been subsumed under the same national identity (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2005). In other Southeast Asian countries, nation-building projects became prominent after gaining independence following the end of World War II. Most countries relied on the centralized, unitary nation-state model to assimilate people of diverse ethnicities and cultures living within the same territory (He & Kymlicka, 2005). In almost all Southeast Asian countries, ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity has been perceived as a threat to national unity, and education is one of the tools that Southeast Asian countries have used to unify people. Mono-cultural educational policies, such as the prohibition of other languages in schools, a centralized curriculum, or the closing of schools set up by ethnic and religious groups, were implemented across countries in the region (Aguilar, 2017). These policies deprived ethnic groups and indigenous people of their cultural practices and identities. The result was resentment, marginalization, and at times, persistent conflicts, as in the case of Muslims in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. However, upon entering the 21st century, a shift in language policies reflecting an ostensible acceptance of cultural diversity has been witnessed in many parts of Southeast Asia. Articles in this special issue document such policy shifts and the movements to reclaim linguistic and cultural rights, as in the case of Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

(MULTI-)LINGUISTIC AND ETHNICITY IN THE CONTEXT OF NATION-BUILDING

Myanmar is inhabited by 135 ethnic groups, each of which has distinguished languages and cultures. This rich linguistic and cultural diversity has long been

suppressed and dominated by the Burmese majority since the government of General Ne Win rose to power in 1962 (Anui & Arphattananon, 2021, this issue). However, in 2011 when the political landscape of Myanmar changed towards democracy, the linguistic and cultural rights of ethnic groups were acknowledged. In education, this change was reflected in the 2014 National Education Law, which stipulated the integration of ethnic languages and cultures into the mainstream curriculum for the first time since Myanmar gained independence. The article by Anui and Thithimadee Arphattananon (2021, this issue) traces the implementation of the policy in Kachin, Kayah, Karen, and Mon states. Through interviews with stakeholders, observations in classrooms, and the examination of policy documents and instruction materials, the authors examine the ways in which ethnic languages and ethnic content were included in the primary school curriculum. The study sheds light on the types of content that were included in the curriculum, and the ways they were taught in the framework of the landmark National Education Law. Although the political tide in Myanmar swung back to military rule again after the coup in February 2021, this article documents the positive results of the education policy, which values the cultural and linguistic diversity of ethnic minority groups.

Malaysia's multiculturalism is represented by the rich linguistic diversity of its multiethnic population – Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous groups (Ibrahim, 2007). In Malaysia, 137 languages are spoken, with the official and national language being Malay. The other major languages representing the diverse culture of the population are Mandarin, Tamil, and English (Pillai, Kaur, & Chau, 2021, this issue). Since the country became independent from British rule, Malay was designated as an official language to strengthen the Malay identity and, at the same time, to distance itself from the colonial past. The purpose of promoting Malay language, along with Malay culture and Islamic religion, was to unite and integrate different ethnic groups (Albury, 2021; Ibrahim, 2007). The English language, which had been used in state offices during the colonial period, gradually decreased in importance. Although Mandarin and Tamil could be used as a medium of instruction in vernacular schools,¹ for Chinese and Indian students respectively, the Malay language has been given a more prestigious status as a national and official language, especially since 1970, due to the force of nationalism and Islamic resurgence (Ibrahim, 2007). However, at the turn of the 21st century, a seismic shift in language policy was witnessed in Malaysia. A policy to teach science and mathematics in English known as *Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris* (PPSMI, Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in English) (Albury, 2021) was implemented under the government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. After being in place for six years, the policy was terminated in 2012 through lobbying efforts by nationalist groups (Gooch, 2009). However, when Mahathir Mohamad was re-elected as prime minister in 2018, the policy was resurrected.

In their article, Stefanie Pillai, Surinderpal Kaur, and Meng Huat Chau (2021, this issue) trace the pendulum of language policies in Malaysia that have swung back and forth between Malay and English since 2000. They examine official statements

1 Vernacular schools in Malaysia provide education for children of Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. Mandarin is used in Chinese schools, whereas Tamil is used in Indian schools as the medium of instruction (Ibrahim, 2007).

regarding the rationale behind language choices in Malaysia to see the stances towards language diversity in the country. Using critical discourse analysis, the authors studied 30,508 articles published from 2000 to 2020 in two major newspapers in Malaysia. They found that globalization and employability, as well as ethnic and national identities, influenced the shifts in language policy. The emphasis on English and Mandarin is based on the belief that proficiency in these two languages will enhance the opportunity to access the globalized world and thus, increase employability. On the contrary, the official statements that support the use of Malay were based on the reasons of strengthening national identity, with an added emphasis on multilingualism. Such statements argue that Malaysians who are proficient in multiple languages are better able to compete in a globalized world. This resonates with the language policies in other Southeast Asian countries. In Thailand, the use of Malay and Chinese languages, which had been prohibited in the 1950s and early 1960s as part of nationalist policy, has been promoted in schools in recent years (Arphattananon, 2011). In other words, in a globalized era, proficiency in languages is seen as having productive value that contributes to the economic development of a country.

Ethnic and highland indigenous groups in Southeast Asia suffer from uneven development policies between rural and urban areas, which has resulted in income inequality, making them one of the most economically disadvantaged groups (Clarke, 2001; Gradin, 2016). The agricultural produce that has been their main source of income is unstable in terms of price and yield, and many have left their communities to find jobs in the city. When the tourism industry began to boom in Thailand in the 1960s (Trupp & Dolezal, 2020), catering for the tourist trade has been a new source of income for many highland indigenous groups. Cultural objects such as necklaces, bracelets, costumes, and food products have been commodified. Although this has brought them increasing monetary return, they are on the edge of losing their cultural heritage as the commercialized cultural objects are removed from their original cultural meaning. Thus, a struggle for sustainable tourism has been an issue for ethnic and indigenous groups in the region.

The Karen ethnic group in Doi Si Than (translated as Four Creeks Mountain) in the province of Chiang Mai is one of the many groups that sees their cultural heritage endangered. The villagers have relied on agriculture as a means of living, but the agricultural yields are so uncertain to sustain their living that many Karen villagers, especially the younger generations, have had to move to the city to find – mostly labor-intensive – jobs. The article by Jitjayang Yambhai, Riemer Knoop, and Patoo Cusripituck (2021, this issue) is based on their participatory action research with Karen villagers in Doi Si Than to revive their cultural assets for sustainable living. Through the process of dialogues, the villagers were invited to reflect on the meanings of their cultural heritage and critically examine the ways in which they can harness them for the sustainable development of their community. Based upon the critical consciousness approach (Freire, 2014), the authors used the design thinking technique to enhance community-based learning. Through the process of dialogue, reflection, and decision-making facilitated by the authors, the villagers were able to redefine the meanings of their material cultures, namely chili paste, necklaces, and bracelets, and to capitalize on them to serve as marketable cultural products. Karen communities also make their own spirits that are used on several occasions, such as to start a

sowing or harvest season, or in wedding and funeral ceremonies. In this participatory research, a distilling house for spirits was transformed into an *ecomuseum* where visitors can experience the spirit-making of the Karen communities. The involved Karen communities came up with new design and business models to marketize their cultural products, and identified sustainable ways of living for their communities.

MULTICULTURAL AND MULTI-LINGUAL EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

The recent increase in the number of labor migrants in Thailand from its three neighboring countries – Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos – has a tremendous effect on education as many migrants bring with them or give birth to children in Thailand. Since the Thai government has approved the enrollment of migrant children in government schools, there has been an increase in cultural diversity in Thailand's educational system. The article by Thithimadee Arphattananon (2021, this issue) explores the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to teach in multicultural settings possessed by teachers in schools where migrant and Thai students study together. From the results of her action research, which included the development and implementation of a training program for teachers in multicultural schools, Arphattananon (2021, this issue) found that teachers who have been trained in the program had higher levels of knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding the education of migrant children compared to those who did not participate in the training program. In Thailand, teachers who teach in schools that enroll migrant children have been put in a 'sink-or-swim' situation as there is no systematic professional development program to support them to teach in multicultural settings. Arphattananon's article points to the importance of having a systematic and continuous professional development program that incorporates elements, such as the rights of education of migrant children, prejudice and stereotype reduction, cultural issues significant to migrant children, and pedagogic approaches for culturally diverse classrooms.

The article by Kulthida Saemee and Jaewon Jane Ra (2021, this issue) explores the perceptions and practices of school personnel and parents regarding language teaching and learning of migrant students from Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia in a Thai government school. Through interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators, and in-classroom-observations, the authors conclude that school personnel – administrators and teachers in particular – play an important role in the learning experiences of migrant students. The article particularly focuses on the communicative functions of language in the school where Thai and migrant students study together, and the role of the Professional Learning Community formed among school personnel and parents as a mechanism that supports the education of migrant students.

The article by Chutiwan Rueangdej and Singhanat Nomnian (2021, this issue) investigates how cultural identities of migrant students are presented in English language textbooks used in Thailand's schooling system. They argue that, although English is widely used across the world, textbooks should contextualize and reflect the cultures in the places where they are being used. Based on their study in a school that enrolls Thai and migrant students in Samut Sakhon province, the authors conclude that English language textbooks should include more content about Southeast Asia to reflect the lives and experiences of students and their families.

The forces of globalization put additional challenges to countries in the region as to how to deal with an increasing diversity brought about by the migration of new groups and the pressing issues of economic and social development. The articles in this special issue illustrate how globalization, characterized as the transnational movement of people and trade, has influenced the shift in education and language policies in many countries in Southeast Asia.



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Thithimadee Arphattananon is an Associate Professor at the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, Thailand. Her research focuses on how education and instructional practices in schools can go beyond the recognition of cultural differences and achieve the goal of equality for students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Until present, she has conducted research that examined multicultural education policies in Thailand and the practices in schools that enrolled students from diverse cultures.

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