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Teaching Migrant Students From Myanmar: Professional Development Program to Facilitate Multicultural Competence for Teachers

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In recent years, the migration of people from Myanmar into Thailand has increased tremendously. Since 2005, when the Thai government officially allowed migrant children to enroll in Thai government schools, there has been a steady increase in the number of migrant students. In such a context, it is imperative that teachers develop multicultural competence, or the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to work with culturally diverse students. However, teachers in Thailand reported that they have not been trained in the knowledge and skills to teach in multicultural classrooms. The study has two main objectives. Firstly, it attempts to design a multicultural education training program that incorporates modules that will lead to building and strengthening teachers' multicultural competence. Secondly, it implements the training program, and measures the level of multicultural competence of teachers who received the training by comparing them to those who do not receive the training. Results revealed that teachers appraised the module about cultures of migrant students and the module about the rules and regulations in enrolling and graduating migrant students as the most useful. Results from an independent-samples t-test showed that the overall multicultural competence level of teachers who participated in the program was significantly different from those who did not participate; teachers who took part in the training demonstrated a higher level of multicultural competence compared to those who did not participate.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity; Migrant Students; Multicultural Competence; Myanmar; Professional Development

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, migration of people into Thailand has increased tremendously. In 2018, the number of non-Thai residents was around 4.9 million, increasing from 3.7 million in 2014 (United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand, 2019). Among these, the number of labor migrants from neighboring Southeast Asian countries, namely Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia, accounted for 3.9 million, or 80% (Harkins, 2019). These newly arrived migrants add to the country's ethnically diverse population, making Thailand one of the most culturally diverse countries in the region.

The migration of people into Thailand poses a challenge in many areas, especially in education. Since 2005, when the government officially allowed migrant children to enroll in Thai government schools, there has been a steady increase in the number of migrant students in schools (Figure 1; Office of Basic Education Commission, 2018). In 2011, approximately 58,000 migrant students from Myanmar, Lao PDR and Cambodia were enrolled in Thai government schools. In 2018, this number increased to 96,207 (Office of Basic Education Commission, 2018). Among these, migrant students from Myanmar constitute the majority. According to the academic year 2018 data, schools in Chiang Mai enrolled the largest number of migrant students, followed by those in Tak, Kanchanaburi, Chiang Rai, and Samut Sakhon, respectively.

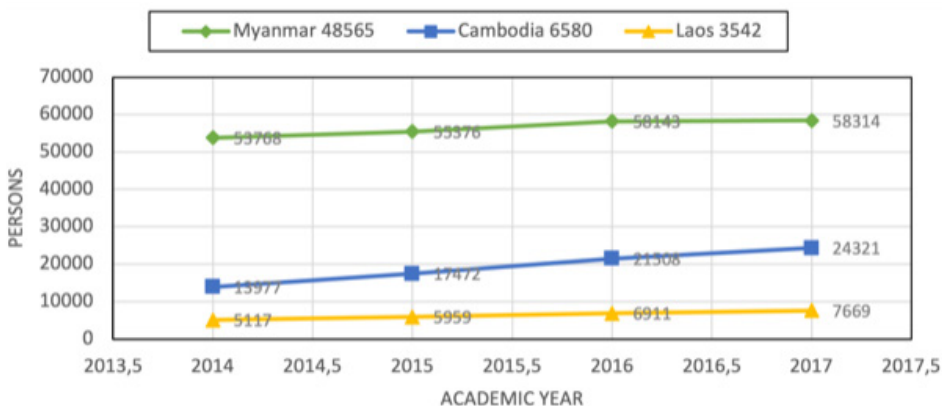


Figure 1. Number of migrant students in Thai schools (2011-2018). (<https://portal.bopp-obec.info/obec60/lison>).

In Thailand, public attitudes towards migrant workers are not favorable. Reports of migrant students and migrant workers, especially those from Myanmar, being the target of ridicule and racism have circulated in mass media and the academic world. For example, studies on the opinions of Thai people towards migrants from Myanmar reveal that Thais regard migrant workers from Myanmar as disease carriers, threats to their lives and property, and competition for jobs and resources (Sunpuwan & Niyomsilpa, 2012; see also, Hall, 2011). These negative attitudes towards migrant workers from Myanmar were exacerbated by the surge of COVID-19 cases in Samut Sakhon province in the late December of 2020 (Reuters & Bangkok Post, 2020)..

In schools as well, migrant students bring with them linguistic and cultural diversity that teachers and school personnel are not used to (von Feigenblatt et al., 2010). It is revealed that teachers’ negative attitudes and low expectations of minority students, curriculum content produced from the perspective of the majority, and instructional practices that are insensitive to students’ cultures all affect equality in the education of ethnic minority students (Banks, 2009; Nieto, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2003). In such a context, it is imperative that teachers have knowledge about students’ cultures as well as the implications of cultural diversity on education. Teachers should develop skills to formulate a culturally relevant curriculum and teach in a

culturally responsive way. They also have to demonstrate positive attitudes towards students from other cultures since it will directly affect students' self-esteem and academic performance (Battle, 2017; Yuan, 2017). All of these constitute multicultural competence, or the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to live and work in a multicultural society (Banks, 2009; Bennett, 2001; Hladik, 2016).

Although multicultural competence is instrumental for those who work in multicultural settings, teachers in Thailand reported that they have not been trained in the knowledge and skills to teach in multicultural classrooms (Nawarat, 2018; Yanyongkasemsuk, 2017; Yongyuan et al., 2010). Many schools that enrolled migrant students have resorted to a business-as-usual approach without adjusting the pedagogy or curriculum content to match with the cultures of the students. Most schools, citing the rationale of neutrality, report that they use the same curriculum – the Basic Education Core Curriculum – formulated by the Ministry of Education for Thai and migrant students, as it does not favor the culture of one group over the other (Arphattananon, 2012). Up until present, professional development for teachers of migrant students in Thailand has been provided in a haphazard manner either by academics from universities or social workers from non-profit organizations. The Thai government, while stipulating a policy aimed at access and budget allocation, left all the decisions on instruction to schools. Without receiving systematic training, teachers are left on their own to try to understand the cultural differences that migrant students bring into their classrooms, including ways to integrate them into their teaching. Instructional techniques thus vary depending on the experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds of each individual teacher. Their understanding of the rights of migrant students to access public education also varies. This affects their practices, including admission of migrant students into schools, follow-up, and provision of support for migrant students and parents.

Recognizing that professional development in multicultural education is necessary but still lacking in Thailand, this study aims at developing a model of professional development that promotes multicultural competence for teachers who teach in schools that enroll migrant students. The study has two main objectives. Firstly, it attempts to design a multicultural education training course that incorporates modules that will lead to building and strengthening teachers' multicultural knowledge, skills, and attitude. Secondly, it measures the level of multicultural competence of teachers who received the training by comparing them to those who did not receive the training. Results from the study can be used as a guideline for developing and improving multicultural education professional development for teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multicultural Competence: Multicultural Knowledge, Multicultural Skills, and Multicultural Attitudes

Scholars in the field of multicultural education emphasize the importance of multicultural competence and have proposed that multicultural competence be taught as one of the basic skills in schools in a world that is becoming more diverse (Bennett, 2001). Multicultural competence, used interchangeably with intercultural competence, is

defined as the ability to interact and understand people who are ethnically, racially, and culturally different from oneself (Banks, 2009; Bennett, 2001). People with multicultural competence are open-minded and without cultural or racial prejudice. Being aware that one's worldview is not universal, people with multicultural competence refrain from using solely their own worldview to judge the behaviors and practices of people from different cultures. Multiculturally competent persons know or are eager to know about the ways of life of diverse cultural groups as well as the distinctive characteristics within those groups. They possess the ability to interpret communication, both verbal and nonverbal, as well as the cultural cues given off by different cultural groups (Byram et al., 2002; Fatini & Tirmizi, 2006).

Multicultural competence consists of behavioral and cognitive skills that people demonstrate when interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram et al., 2002; Fatini & Tirmizi, 2006; Hladik, 2016; van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000). Multicultural knowledge refers to knowledge of other cultures such as history, values and customs as well as knowledge of one's own culture (Association of American College and Universities, n.d.). Knowledge about one's own culture includes cultural self-awareness where individuals identify rules and biases that their culture creates. Knowledge about other cultures includes an understanding of elements such as history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, beliefs, and practices that are important to its members. Teachers need to know how to create a supportive school and classroom environment where students' cultural identities are valued (Nieto, 2004). Hladik (2016) stresses the importance of knowledge about how racism, prejudice, and ethnocentrism are generated and affect students. Teachers also need to have knowledge about children's rights, as well as government policies and regulations on the admission of migrant students into schools. However, because one's pool of knowledge about other cultures is limited, Byram et al. (2002) point out that skills and eagerness to seek out knowledge about other cultures are as important as the knowledge itself.

The second component of multicultural competence is skills to live and work in a culturally diverse environment. Skills are generally divided into empathy and communication – both verbal and non-verbal. Empathy means the ability to interpret experiences when being in contact with other cultures from multiple perspectives, as well as the ability to sympathize with the feelings and experiences of people from other cultural groups. Skills in verbal and non-verbal communication range from a minimal understanding of verbal and non-verbal languages of other cultures to a complex understanding of the cultural codes that underpin the communication. Besides these skills, teachers need to know how to integrate information and examples from students' cultures into subject areas and classroom teaching (Banks, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 2003). Teachers should be able to teach in ways that help students develop positive intercultural attitudes and promote academic achievement in students from diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

Byram et al. (2002) stated that multicultural attitudes are the foundation of multicultural competence. Multicultural attitudes include curiosity about other cultures and open-mindedness, which means the ability to suspend prejudice when encountering people from other cultures whose beliefs, values, and behaviors are different from one's own. Individuals who possess a multicultural attitude are able

to “decenter and relativize” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 7) their values and beliefs when encountering other sets of cultural beliefs, values, and behaviors. Teachers who teach students whose cultures are different from their own should have positive attitudes and high expectations for students, as it will affect students’ academic performance and self-concept (Banks, 2008). Not only do they have to possess a multicultural attitude themselves, teachers should also cultivate positive attitudes among students from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups (Banks, 2008; Stephen & Stephen, 2004).

Professional Development for Multicultural Competence

Parkhouse et al. (2019) reviewed 48 publications on the effectiveness of multicultural professional development and concluded that in order to have long-lasting impacts on student achievement and to change the practices of teachers, the training program has to incorporate the following characteristics. First, the duration of the program needs to be substantial and extended. Multicultural education professional development programs should have a clear focus on specific subject matters and target specific groups of students. Second, the training agenda should be in line with educational policies at the district, state, or national levels. Third, teachers should be actively involved in the training process. Collective participation that emphasizes a learning community, rather than individualized learning, is likely to be more effective, especially when enacted as a part of a total school reform process. One of the challenges that most multicultural education professional development programs face is to get teachers to develop consciousness and be aware of stereotypes and prejudices against those from different racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds.

Upon reviewing 28 studies on professional development in teaching, Kennedy (2016) found that program design – such as program duration, topics, and activities – is less likely to link to program effectiveness compared to the pedagogies employed in the program. Pedagogies that are geared towards active learning have proven to be more effective than lectures. Effective professional development programs tend to use facilitators who have long experience working with teachers and are familiar with the issues that they face. While it is important that professional development programs provide information about the cultures of ethnic minority students, they risk stereotyping or essentializing ethnic cultures as static. Scholars suggest that instead of focusing on cultures as static artifacts, professional development programs should also focus on the struggles and resistance of the groups against racism, discrimination, and unfair treatment (Leistyna, 2001). Moreover, members of the ethnic groups should be invited to facilitate the training (Parkhouse et al., 2019).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Multicultural competence, which comprises multicultural knowledge, multicultural skills, and multicultural attitudes, as well as the research on effective professional development for multicultural education reviewed in the previous section, serve as a conceptual framework for this study. The researcher used the qualities of these three components of multicultural competence as a guideline to develop a training

program for teachers and formulate questionnaire items to measure their multicultural competence after the training. Guided by the research on effective professional development (Kennedy, 2016; Leistyna, 2001; Parkhouse et al., 2019), the training program was divided into four modules, namely: 1) rights to education of migrant children; 2) cultures of migrant students from Myanmar; 3) prejudice and stereotype reduction; and 4) pedagogic approaches to teaching migrant students (Figure 2). Module 1, rights to education of migrant children, aims to develop knowledge regarding the rights of children to receive education and related laws, rules, and regulations. Module 2, culture of migrant students from Myanmar, as the name suggests, aims to develop teachers' knowledge of the cultures of migrant students and families from Myanmar. Module 3, prejudice and stereotype reduction, explains the meaning and causes of prejudice and stereotypes as well as classroom activities and lesson plans to develop positive attitudes among migrants and Thai students. Activities to help teachers reflect on their own stereotypes and prejudices were also included in this module. Module 4, pedagogic approaches to teaching migrant students, introduces culturally relevant instructional methods and provides a chance for teachers to practice formulating lesson plans that integrate information about the students' cultures.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was divided into two phases: 1) developing multicultural competence through a training program; and 2) evaluating teachers' multicultural competence level after the training. Samut Sakhon province, located in Bangkok, was selected as the research site because it has the second largest number of migrant workers from Myanmar in the country. Due to resources, time, and accessibility, five government schools with the highest number of migrant students from Myanmar in the province were purposively selected as target schools. All of the teachers and principals from the five schools were called on to participate. In total, 80 people, comprising 78 teachers and two principals from the five schools, participated in the research.

In the first phase, the researcher used a training program to develop multicultural competence for teachers. The four-day training program, spanning over the period of three weeks, included the four modules described above (Figure 2). The format of the training included lectures by the researcher and invited speakers, group discussions to share experiences and opinions regarding the issues of migrant student dropout, placement of migrant students in appropriate classes and the necessity of culturally relevant teaching, as well as hands-on activities that asked teachers to plan the lessons that incorporated students' cultures. The data from all the activities was video-recorded. Experts in curriculum development from the Provincial Education Office and academics who specialized in the ethnic cultures of Myanmar were invited as facilitators. A former migrant student from Myanmar was invited as a guest speaker to share her experience studying in a Thai school. Officers from the Provincial Education Office were invited to explain the rules and regulations for enrolling migrant students. Due to restrictions on teachers' work, training was conducted at the weekends. During the small-group activities, the researcher deliberately arranged the groups so that they comprised members from different schools so that teachers could exchange experiences with colleagues from other schools.

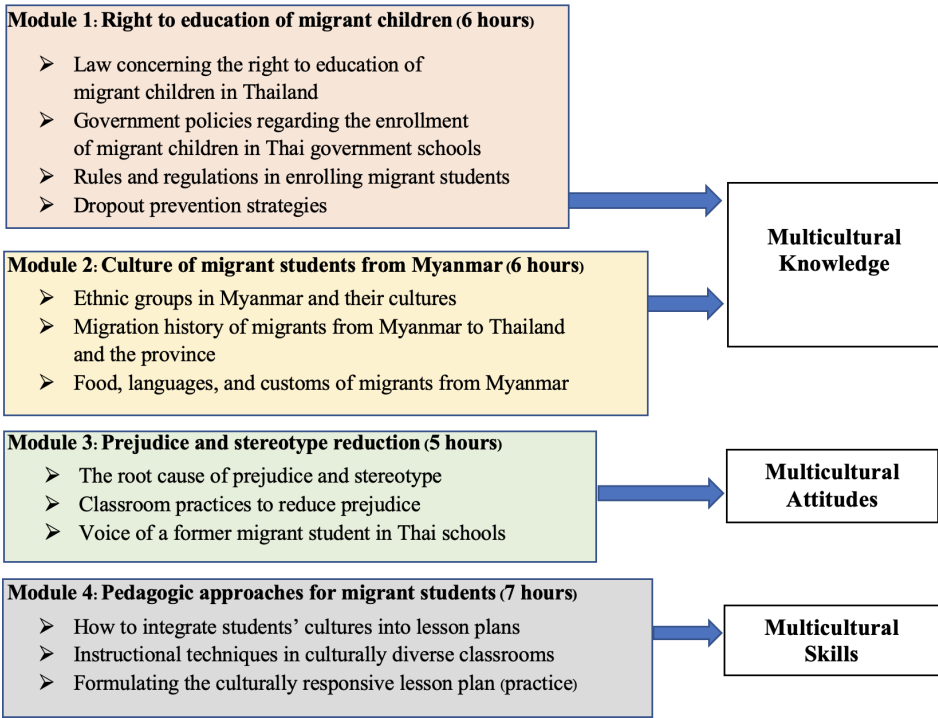


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of the training program. (author's compilation).

In the second phase, the post-intervention-only design was used to measure the multicultural competence of participating teachers at the end of the training. Seventy completed questionnaires (87.5%) were obtained from 80 participants. The multicultural competence mean scores of the participant group were compared to those of the comparison group. In order to assure internal validity that the differences in mean scores were due to the training, five schools in Samut Sakhon province that have similar characteristics as the participant group were selected as the comparison group. The number of migrant students, number of teachers, age distribution, and teachers' experiences working in multicultural schools served as criteria in selecting the comparison group. After the comparison group was identified, the same questionnaire was distributed by postal mail to teachers in the comparison group. Seventy-seven questionnaires were returned. However, after eliminating those with missing data, 65 completed questionnaires were analyzed. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the level of multicultural competence of teachers who had participated in the training with that of teachers in the comparison group. One weakness of the study is that the researcher did not examine the relationship between the independent variables – characteristics of teachers such as their age, educational backgrounds, grade level taught, and experiences teaching in multicultural schools – and the dependent variable, which is their level of multicultural competence. Future research can examine whether the attributes of teachers such as their teaching experiences, or the subjects and grade levels that they teach affect their level of multicultural competence.

Data Collection Instrument

Guided by the three components of multicultural competence and drawing from items in the Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory (Henry, 1986), the researcher designed a questionnaire to measure the multicultural competence of teachers who participated in the training. The questionnaire is divided into three parts. The first part asked for demographic data, that is, age, years of teaching in multicultural schools, level of education, and grade level taught. The second part of the questionnaire, which measured levels of multicultural competence, comprised 35 items: 15 items to assess multicultural knowledge; 9 items to assess multicultural skills; and 11 items to assess multicultural attitudes. Teachers were asked to rank their level of multicultural competence based on the five-point Likert scales of strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1). The third part of the questionnaire contained open-ended questions asking respondents to freely add their opinions or comments. Three academics from a Thai university who specialized in multicultural education were asked to evaluate the items listed in the questionnaire for content validity and objective congruence using the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index. Only the questionnaire items that received a score higher than 0.5 were used. The revised questionnaire was tested with 30 teachers who were not participants in this study. Cronbach's Alpha, as a coefficient of the questionnaire's reliability, measured 0.915. The Cronbach's Alpha for each sub-scale are as follows: 0.812 for multicultural knowledge; 0.797 for multicultural skills; and 0.844 for multicultural attitudes.

Ethical Consideration

Prior to collecting data, the study was approved by the university's Institution Review Board¹. The study was conducted according to ethical guidelines for research with human subjects in social science. Participants' autonomy and privacy were protected; participants signed an informed consent to indicate their willingness to participate. Any identifiable data was not collected.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Results of the study are divided into two parts: 1) the demographics of the participant and comparison groups; 2) the level of multicultural competence of the teachers who participated in the training compared to those who did not participate.

Demographic Information of Participant and Comparison Groups

Table 1 shows the demographic data of teachers who received the training and those in the comparison group. Both groups were similar in terms of age distribution, educational backgrounds, and prior experiences in multicultural education training.

1 IPSR-IRB Certificate of Approval No.2020/05-215.

Teachers who participated in the training		Teachers who did not attend the training (comparison group)	
Variable	Sample (N=70)	Variable	Sample (N=65)
Gender		Gender	
Female	59 (84.3%)	Female	53 (81.5%)
Male	11 (15.7%)	Male	12 (18.5%)
Position		Position	
Teacher	68 (97.1%)	Teacher	63 (96.8%)
Principals	2 (2.9%)	Principals	2 (3.2%)
Age		Age	
Below 30	30 (42.9%)	Below 30	37 (56.9%)
31-40	30 (42.9%)	31-40	11 (16.9%)
41-50	7 (10%)	41-50	11 (16.9%)
Above 50	3 (4.2%)	Above 50	6 (9.3%)
Received multicultural education training in the past 5 years		Received multicultural education training in the past 5 years	
Yes	8 (11.4%)	Yes	4 (6.2%)
No	62 (88.6%)	No	61 (93.8%)
Education		Education	
Lower than B.A.	3 (4.3%)	Lower than B.A.	2 (3.1%)
B.A.	54 (77.1%)	B.A.	51 (78.4%)
M.A.	11 (15.7%)	M.A.	12 (18.5%)
Higher than M.A.	2 (2.9%)	Higher than M.A.	0
Experience teaching in multicultural schools		Experience teaching in multicultural schools	
0-5 Years	48 (68.6%)	0-5 Years	41 (63.1%)
6-10 Years	13 (18.6%)	6-10 Years	9 (13.8%)
11-20 Years	8(11.4%)	11-20 Years	8 (12.3%)
More than 20 Years	1 (1.4%)	More than 20 Years	7 (10.8%)
Grade level taught		Grade level taught	
Kindergarten	16 (22.9%)	Kindergarten	10 (15.4%)
Grade 1-3	23 (32.9%)	Grade 1-3	24 (36.9%)
Grade 4-6	22 (31.4%)	Grade 4-6	27 (41.5%)
Grade 7-9	7 (10%)	Grade 7-9	4 (6.2%)
not teaching	2 (2.8)		

Table 1. Demographic information of participant and comparison group.

Multicultural Competence of Teachers Who Participated in the Training as Compared to Those Who Did not Participate

Multicultural components	Group	Mean	SD	t	df	sig	Mean Diff
Multicultural knowledge	Participant (N=70)	3.847	.409	2.326	117.696	.022*	.19436
	Comparison (N=65)	3.652	.548				
Multicultural skills	Participant (N=70)	3.859	.442	1.349	133	.180	.11343
	Comparison (N=65)	3.745	.533				
Multicultural attitudes	Participant (N=70)	4.035	.730	3.525	123.631	.001*	.49800
	Comparison (N=65)	3.537	.896				
Overall multi-cultural competence	Participant (N=70)	3.909	.382	3.647	133	.000*	.26898
	Comparison (N=65)	3.640	.472				

* $p < 0.05$

Table 2. Independent sample t-test of the multicultural competence levels of participant and comparison groups. (author's compilation).

In Table 2, the participant and comparison groups' levels of multicultural competence are presented. Using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), the mean scores of the second part were calculated and interpreted as follows: 4.01-5.00 = excellent; 3.01-4.00 = good; 2.01-3.00 = average; 1.01-2.00 = poor; and 0.01-1.00 = very poor. The mean scores indicated that the level of multicultural competence of the teachers who participated in the training and those who did not participate were both at the level of good. After breaking up into individual components, the mean score of "multicultural knowledge" and "multicultural skills" of the participant group were at the level of good, while "multicultural attitudes" was at the level of excellent. For the comparison group, the mean score of all components were at the level of good.

At 95% confidence level, there were statistical differences between the overall multicultural competence levels of teachers who participated in the training and those who did not participate. Teachers and principals who took part in the training demonstrated a higher level of multicultural competence ($M = 3.909$, $SD = .382$) compared to those who did not participate ($M = 3.640$, $SD = .472$). Breaking this down to each multicultural component, there were also statistical differences between the level of multicultural knowledge and multicultural attitudes of the teachers who underwent the training and those who did not ($p < 0.05$). Teachers who participated in the training had a higher level of multicultural knowledge and more positive multicultural attitudes compared to those who did not participate in the training. For multicultural skills, although teachers who took part in the training showed higher mean scores ($M = 3.859$, $SD = .442$) compared to those who did not participate ($M = 3.745$, $SD = .533$), the difference was not statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

Findings show that teachers who participated in the training had higher levels of multicultural competence compared to those who did not participate. The study

carefully selected a comparison group that had similar characteristics as the group that received the training. Thus, the effect of the training is undeniable. Teachers who participated in the training program highly rated the program's interactive pedagogy. This is congruent with what scholars who studied effective professional development have recommended (Kennedy, 2016). Among the three components, multicultural knowledge was the area that teachers needed to be trained on most. According to teachers, knowledge of rules and regulations in enrolling and graduating migrant students is the most necessary since they are very complicated and constantly changing. Misconduct in this area would affect migrant students' opportunities to continue their education or to apply for citizenship. It is important that officers who are knowledgeable about this issue serve as facilitators or speakers in this module. Teachers also revealed that they found the training module about the cultures of migrants from Myanmar very helpful in designing and formulating lesson plans and learning activities. Most teachers rarely knew about the migrant families' ways of life, especially how they valued education of their children. Knowledge in this area would help teachers deal with dropouts and provide advice on students' future courses. Teachers who participated in the training suggested that the training program should include a half-day visit to learning centers² or migrant communities.

During the training, teachers had a chance to listen to the experiences of migrant students, including the racism that they faced inside and outside of school. This helped increase their awareness of how discrimination and racism worked against migrant students. However, as stated in previous research, multicultural attitudes cannot be changed overnight (Aboud, 2009; Banks, 2008; Byram et al., 2002). Therefore, the sustainability of the training to develop teachers' attitudes is questionable. The literature about effective professional development emphasizes that the training program should occur for extended periods (Parkhouse et al., 2019). However, with their tremendous workload, teachers voiced that they preferred a 12-to-15-hour weekend training. To maximize the effect of the training program without causing extra burden on the teachers, this study recommends that professional development for multicultural education should be embedded in the school policy and built into the action plans of schools, so that it weaves into the everyday practices.

CONCLUSION

In today's globalized world, the transnational flow of people will continue. The situation where migrant students study together with Thai students will continue. The cultural diversity that students bring with them will challenge the monocultural teaching that teachers are used to (von Feigenblatt et al., 2010). It is necessary that teachers know their students' cultures, have the skills to incorporate students' cultures in their teaching and possess positive attitudes for students who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. This is the basis of multicultural education, which respects cultural diversity and equality for all students. Teachers need to be prepared to teach students from a diverse range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Classroom interventions

2 "Learning Centers" are found by civil society organizations to provide education for migrant children. Most learning centers are not officially accredited by the Thai government.

such as cooperative learning, which requires group members to work towards the same goal, can help reduce prejudice and stereotypes (Sleeter & Grant, 2003). Teachers play a key role in educating students to have multicultural competence. Professional development that prepares teachers to teach in culturally diverse contexts is indispensable (Alismail, 2016; Lander, 2014). Currently, there is no organized professional development for teachers who teach migrant students in Thailand. Each school and each individual teacher has to seek opportunities for professional development. As seen from the results of this study, professional development had positive effects on the multicultural competence of teachers. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that the Ministry of Education or responsible authorities provide systematic and continuous professional development for teachers who teach migrant students throughout the country. This study focuses on migrant students from Myanmar in Samut Sakhon province. Future research should expand the findings from this study to migrant students from other nationalities who study in other provinces. The questionnaire developed in this study can be used to study the multicultural competence of teachers who teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds elsewhere in Thailand.



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