



## EDUCATION AND INEQUALITY: THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FACED BY MINORITY ETHNIC GROUPS IN THAILAND

Yasothara Siriphaprapagon

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khon Kaen Campus, Khon Kaen, Thailand  
Author Corresponding Email: yasotharar.s@gmail.com

ได้รับบทความ : 02-02-2023	แก้ไขบทความ : 06-06-2023	ตอบรับบทความ : 12-02-2024
Received : 02-02-2023	Revised : 06-06-2023	Accepted : 12-02-2024

**Abstract:** This paper examines the educational challenges faced by minority ethnic groups in Thailand, including the Karen, Hmong, Akha, and others. It explores key barriers such as language, access to quality education, and cultural insensitivity in the national curriculum. The study highlights how these challenges contribute to educational inequality and perpetuate poverty and marginalization within ethnic minority communities. It also reviews government initiatives, NGO efforts, and international collaborations aimed at addressing these disparities, offering recommendations for promoting bilingual education, improving access to education in remote areas, and fostering greater inclusion in the educational system. Ultimately, the paper calls for a more culturally sensitive and inclusive approach to education to ensure equal opportunities for all students in Thailand.

**Keywords:** Educational inequality, ethnic minorities, bilingual education, cultural sensitivity, Thailand

### 1.Introduction

Thailand is home to a rich diversity of ethnic groups, including the Karen, Hmong, Akha, Lahu, and others, each with its unique cultural heritage and linguistic traditions. These groups predominantly reside in rural and remote areas, particularly in northern and western regions of the country (Keyes, 2014). While they contribute significantly to the cultural fabric of Thailand, ethnic minority communities have historically faced marginalization in various aspects of Thai society, particularly in education.

Education is a critical tool for social mobility, enabling individuals to rise above poverty, gain access to better employment opportunities, and participate more fully in civic life. For minority ethnic groups, education represents not only an opportunity for personal development but also a means to improve the economic and social conditions of their communities (Draper, 2015). However, despite the recognized



importance of education in uplifting marginalized groups, the current state of education for ethnic minorities in Thailand reveals persistent challenges.

The current state of education for minority ethnic groups in Thailand is marked by significant disparities compared to the general population. Many ethnic minority children face obstacles such as inadequate school infrastructure, a lack of qualified teachers, and curricula that do not reflect or accommodate their linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Schliesinger, 2015). In addition, the predominance of the Thai language in education creates a language barrier that prevents non-Thai-speaking children from fully engaging in the learning process, resulting in lower academic performance and higher dropout rates.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the educational challenges faced by minority ethnic groups in Thailand. By examining these challenges, the paper seeks to highlight the ways in which language barriers, cultural insensitivity in the curriculum, and limited access to quality education perpetuate inequality within the education system. It will also consider how these factors affect the social and economic outcomes for ethnic minority communities.

Furthermore, this paper aims to analyze the role of education in addressing social inequality and promoting the integration of ethnic minorities into broader Thai society. By improving educational opportunities and making education more accessible and inclusive, Thailand can reduce the marginalization of ethnic groups and create pathways for greater social and economic participation.

Despite government efforts to improve access to education, minority ethnic groups in Thailand continue to face significant challenges related to language barriers, access to quality education, and a lack of cultural sensitivity in the curriculum. These factors contribute to the perpetuation of educational inequality, limiting the social and economic opportunities available to these communities and reinforcing their marginalization within Thai society.

## **2. Overview of Minority Ethnic Groups in Thailand**

### **2.1 Ethnic Diversity in Thailand**

Thailand is home to a rich tapestry of minority ethnic groups, each with distinct cultural and linguistic traditions. Some of the largest and most well-known groups include the Karen, Hmong, Akha, and Lahu. These groups predominantly inhabit the northern and western regions of Thailand, particularly in provinces like Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, and Tak (Schliesinger, 2015). The Karen, for example, are the largest minority group and are concentrated in the mountainous regions near the Thai-Myanmar border. The Hmong, another significant group, primarily reside in the northern highlands, while the Akha and Lahu communities are also located in northern Thailand, near the borders with Laos and Myanmar (Keyes, 2014).



The geographic distribution of these groups often corresponds with rural, remote areas, which poses significant challenges for their access to services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Despite their contributions to Thailand's cultural diversity, these ethnic minorities have historically faced marginalization, with many still lacking legal citizenship status, further limiting their access to education and other essential services (Draper, 2015).

## **2.2 Socioeconomic Status of Minority Ethnic Groups**

Ethnic minorities in Thailand generally face socioeconomic disadvantages, including lower income levels, limited access to healthcare, and poor infrastructure in their communities. Many of these groups rely on subsistence farming and seasonal labor, which provides little economic stability. Poverty rates among ethnic minorities are disproportionately high compared to the rest of the population, contributing to a cycle of deprivation that affects education, healthcare, and overall quality of life (Feingold, 2014).

Education is widely seen as a key factor in improving the economic opportunities for minority ethnic groups in Thailand. By providing children with access to quality education, these communities can break the cycle of poverty and enhance their prospects for economic mobility. However, the limited availability of schools in remote areas, coupled with language barriers and cultural insensitivity in the education system, hinders the ability of many ethnic minority children to complete their education and achieve the same level of success as their Thai counterparts (Schliesinger, 2015).

## **2.3 Historical and Policy Context**

Historically, ethnic minorities in Thailand have been marginalized, both politically and socially. The Thai state has long promoted a homogenizing national identity, centered around the Thai language, Buddhism, and loyalty to the monarchy. This has resulted in efforts to assimilate ethnic minorities into mainstream Thai culture, often at the expense of their linguistic and cultural heritage (Keyes, 2014). Throughout the 20th century, government policies such as the establishment of national schools, where instruction is conducted in Thai, have reinforced this assimilationist approach, making it difficult for ethnic minority groups to maintain their languages and traditions.

In recent decades, however, the Thai government has implemented policies aimed at integrating ethnic groups and promoting education for all. Initiatives such as the 1999 National Education Act have sought to provide greater access to education for all children, including ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, many challenges remain,



particularly in ensuring that these policies are effectively implemented in remote, rural areas where ethnic minority groups are concentrated (Draper, 2015).

### 3. Educational Challenges Faced by Minority Ethnic Groups

#### 3.1 Language Barriers

One of the most significant educational challenges faced by minority ethnic groups in Thailand is the language barrier. The Thai language is the dominant language of instruction in schools across the country, which poses a considerable obstacle for non-Thai-speaking students, particularly those from ethnic minority groups such as the Karen, Hmong, and Akha (Schliesinger, 2015). For children who grow up speaking their native languages at home, transitioning to a school system where Thai is the only medium of instruction can be daunting and alienating. This language barrier often results in lower academic performance and higher dropout rates, as students struggle to understand lessons and communicate effectively with teachers and peers (Draper, 2015).

The lack of bilingual education exacerbates these challenges. In many countries with ethnolinguistic diversity, bilingual education programs allow students to learn in both their native language and the national language, improving learning outcomes and preserving cultural heritage. However, such programs are limited in Thailand, particularly in remote, rural areas where ethnic minority groups are concentrated. Without access to bilingual education, ethnic minority students are left at a disadvantage, unable to fully engage in the learning process, which contributes to educational inequality (Kosonen, 2005).

#### 3.2 Access to Quality Education

Access to quality education is another major challenge for ethnic minority children in Thailand, particularly those living in rural and remote areas. Schools in these regions often suffer from poor infrastructure, including inadequate classrooms, limited access to learning materials, and a lack of modern technology (Keyes, 2014). In addition, many of the schools serving ethnic minority populations are understaffed, and the teachers who are present are often underqualified, with little experience in culturally responsive teaching or working in diverse classrooms (Schliesinger, 2015).

The geographic isolation of ethnic minority communities further limits access to education. Many children have to travel long distances, often on foot, to reach the nearest school, which deters regular attendance. In some cases, children from the most remote areas are unable to attend school altogether due to transportation challenges. This lack of access to education contributes to low literacy rates and poor academic performance, which in turn affects the long-term economic opportunities available to ethnic minority students (Feingold, 2014).



### **3.3 Cultural Insensitivity in the Curriculum**

The national curriculum in Thailand largely reflects the values, history, and cultural norms of the dominant Thai population, leaving little room for the cultural representation of minority ethnic groups. As a result, ethnic minority students often find that their own histories, languages, and cultural practices are either ignored or marginalized in the classroom (Draper, 2015). This lack of cultural inclusion can make education feel alien to these students, further disengaging them from the learning process.

Additionally, there are often tensions between traditional cultural practices and the formal education system. For many ethnic minority groups, education is seen as a tool for survival and community continuity, rather than as a means of individual social mobility. Traditional cultural practices, such as seasonal migration for farming or participating in local cultural festivals, sometimes clash with the rigid academic calendar, leading to absenteeism and a further disconnect between ethnic minority students and the formal education system (Kosonen, 2005).

### **3.4 Economic Barriers**

The economic barriers faced by ethnic minority communities also have a significant impact on educational outcomes. Many families from ethnic minority groups live in poverty and are unable to afford the cost of education, including fees, uniforms, books, and transportation. While primary education in Thailand is officially free, there are often hidden costs that place an additional burden on low-income families, especially those in remote areas where schools are few and far between (Feingold, 2014).

Moreover, children from these communities are frequently expected to contribute to family income, either by working in the fields or engaging in other forms of labor. This need to prioritize economic survival often leads to lower school attendance rates and higher dropout rates among ethnic minority students. Without sufficient financial support, many ethnic minority children are unable to complete their education, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and limiting their future opportunities (Schliesinger, 2015).

## **4. Impact of Educational Inequality on Ethnic Minority Communities**

### **4.1 Effects on Literacy and Academic Achievement**

Educational inequality significantly impacts the literacy rates and academic performance of ethnic minority students in Thailand. Studies show that ethnic minority children, especially those from rural areas, tend to have much lower literacy rates compared to their Thai counterparts (Ng, 2015). The language barrier, lack of



qualified teachers, and inadequate educational infrastructure further exacerbate this disparity (Kosonen, 2005). As a result, ethnic minority students often lag behind academically, making it difficult for them to compete with their peers in standardized assessments and national examinations (UNESCO, 2010).

The long-term effects of these educational disparities are evident in employment opportunities and social mobility. Lower academic achievement limits the ability of ethnic minority students to pursue higher education or vocational training, which in turn affects their employment prospects (Feingold, 2014). As a result, many ethnic minority individuals remain in low-wage, unskilled labor, unable to break out of the cycle of poverty. The lack of access to quality education thus plays a crucial role in perpetuating social and economic inequality within Thailand's ethnic minority communities (Durnnian, 2018).

#### **4.2 Social and Cultural Exclusion**

Educational inequality not only affects academic outcomes but also contributes to the social and cultural exclusion of ethnic minority groups. The Thai education system, with its emphasis on the Thai language and culture, often marginalizes minority students by failing to incorporate their languages and cultural heritage into the curriculum (Draper, 2015). This exclusion reinforces feelings of alienation and marginalization among ethnic minority students, who may struggle to reconcile their cultural identity with the demands of the formal education system (Schliesinger, 2015).

For many ethnic minorities, education becomes a space where they are pressured to conform to dominant cultural norms, which can lead to the erosion of their native languages and traditions. The lack of representation of their cultures in the classroom reinforces the notion that their identity is inferior or unworthy of recognition, which further entrenches social marginalization (McCarty, 2011). This marginalization extends beyond the classroom and affects their ability to integrate fully into Thai society, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and inequality.

#### **4.3 Intergenerational Poverty**

One of the most significant consequences of educational inequality for ethnic minority groups in Thailand is the perpetuation of intergenerational poverty. When children from ethnic minority communities are denied access to quality education, they are less likely to acquire the skills and qualifications needed for higher-paying jobs. This lack of educational opportunities traps many ethnic minority families in a cycle of poverty that persists across generations (Ng, 2015).

Education is widely recognized as a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of poverty, but for ethnic minority communities, the barriers to accessing education are numerous. From the high costs of schooling to the need for children to work and



contribute to family income, economic constraints often prevent ethnic minority children from completing their education (Feingold, 2014). Without a strong educational foundation, these individuals are unable to secure stable, well-paying jobs, leaving them vulnerable to continued poverty and economic hardship (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

However, there are also numerous examples of how education can break this cycle when the right policies and interventions are in place. Programs that provide financial support, culturally relevant education, and language instruction in both Thai and ethnic minority languages can significantly improve educational outcomes for minority students. In turn, these improvements can lead to better employment opportunities, higher incomes, and greater social mobility for ethnic minority families (Durnnian, 2018).

## 5. Government and NGO Efforts to Address Educational Inequality

### 5.1 Government Policies and Reforms

The Thai government has implemented several policies and reforms aimed at improving educational access for minority ethnic groups. One such initiative is the 1999 National Education Act, which outlines the government's commitment to providing equal education for all, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status. In line with this policy, programs have been established to promote inclusive education, with a focus on expanding educational opportunities in rural and remote areas where many ethnic minority groups reside (Chapman & Adams, 2002). Furthermore, the government has launched initiatives to integrate ethnic minority languages and cultural content into the curriculum, though the implementation of such programs remains inconsistent across the country (Kosonen, 2005).

Despite these efforts, the success of these policies in reducing educational inequality has been mixed. While some progress has been made in expanding access to primary education, many ethnic minority students still face barriers related to language, cultural insensitivity, and economic hardship. The lack of qualified teachers who are trained to work in diverse classrooms, combined with inadequate resources for schools in minority-dominated areas, has limited the effectiveness of government interventions (Ng, 2015). Additionally, although the Thai government has expressed a commitment to inclusive education, there is still a strong emphasis on assimilation into the dominant Thai culture, which often marginalizes the languages and cultural practices of ethnic minority groups (Draper, 2015).

### 5.2 Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a critical role in addressing the educational challenges faced by ethnic minority groups in Thailand. Many NGOs



focus on providing educational opportunities and resources that are tailored to the specific needs of ethnic communities, including bilingual education programs, scholarships, and vocational training. These organizations often operate in regions where government services are limited, helping to bridge the gap in access to education for marginalized populations (Etherton, 2009).

A key success story is the work of the Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot, which offers educational programs for ethnic minority children along the Thai-Myanmar border. The clinic operates schools that provide a culturally sensitive curriculum and instruction in both the students' native languages and Thai. This initiative has significantly improved literacy rates and educational outcomes for children who would otherwise have limited access to schooling due to their geographic and economic circumstances (Durnnian, 2018).

Another example is the Hill Area Development Foundation (HADF), which focuses on empowering ethnic minority communities through education. HADF provides training for teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds, ensuring that they are equipped to address the specific educational and cultural needs of their students. This community-based approach has led to a greater sense of ownership and engagement in the educational process among ethnic minority groups, contributing to better student retention and academic performance (McCarty, 2011).

### 5.3 International Support and Collaborations

International organizations, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank, have also played a crucial role in supporting educational efforts for ethnic minority groups in Thailand. These organizations work in collaboration with the Thai government and local NGOs to implement projects aimed at reducing educational inequality. One of the key areas of focus for these international organizations is the promotion of bilingual and culturally relevant education, which is essential for improving the learning outcomes of ethnic minority students (UNESCO, 2010).

International collaborations have led to the development of innovative programs that address both the educational and social needs of ethnic minority communities. For example, UNICEF has worked with the Thai government to improve access to early childhood education in ethnic minority regions, emphasizing the importance of early literacy and language development in both Thai and local languages. These programs have shown promise in reducing dropout rates and improving educational attainment among ethnic minority children (Baker, 2003).

However, challenges remain in ensuring that these international efforts are sustainable and scalable. While pilot programs have been successful in specific regions, the broader implementation of these initiatives across Thailand has been hindered by a lack of resources, political will, and local capacity (Chapman & Adams, 2002). Continued collaboration between the Thai government, international



organizations, and local NGOs will be essential for achieving long-term progress in reducing educational inequality for ethnic minority groups.

## **6. Recommendations for Improving Education for Minority Ethnic Groups**

### **6.1 Promoting Bilingual and Culturally Relevant Education**

One of the most pressing needs for minority ethnic groups in Thailand is the implementation of bilingual education programs. These programs can help bridge the language barriers that ethnic minority students face by providing instruction in both their native languages and Thai. Research has shown that students who are taught in their mother tongue during the early stages of education perform better academically and are more likely to stay in school (Kosonen, 2005). By promoting bilingual education, Thailand can improve educational outcomes for ethnic minorities and help them retain their cultural identity.

In addition to bilingual education, it is essential to incorporate ethnic minority cultures and histories into the national curriculum. Currently, the curriculum is predominantly focused on Thai history and culture, which marginalizes ethnic minorities and contributes to their sense of exclusion (Draper, 2015). By including the traditions, languages, and histories of ethnic minority groups, Thailand can create a more inclusive educational environment that respects and values diversity. This will not only improve the learning experience for ethnic minority students but also foster greater social cohesion among all students.

### **6.2 Improving Access to Education in Remote Areas**

To address the educational inequality faced by ethnic minority communities, the Thai government must invest in infrastructure and resources for schools in rural and remote areas where these communities are concentrated. Many schools in these regions suffer from poor facilities, a lack of learning materials, and inadequate access to technology (Ng, 2015). Upgrading these schools and ensuring they have the necessary resources to provide a quality education is critical for improving educational outcomes for ethnic minority students.

Another key recommendation is to provide incentives for qualified teachers to work in remote areas. Many rural schools struggle to attract and retain qualified educators, which affects the quality of education provided to ethnic minority students. Offering financial incentives, housing allowances, and professional development opportunities could encourage more teachers to work in these underserved regions (McCarty, 2011). Additionally, teacher training programs should include specific



instruction on how to work with ethnically diverse student populations, ensuring that educators are prepared to meet the unique needs of minority students.

### **6.3 Financial Support for Ethnic Minority Families**

Economic barriers are a major factor preventing ethnic minority students from accessing education. To address this issue, the government should expand scholarship programs and financial aid targeted at low-income ethnic minority students. These programs would help cover tuition fees, school supplies, and other education-related expenses, making it easier for families to send their children to school (Feingold, 2014).

Furthermore, the government should work to reduce the hidden costs of education, such as transportation and uniforms, which can be a significant burden for low-income families. Providing free or subsidized school supplies and transportation services would alleviate some of these financial pressures and ensure that all children, regardless of their economic background, have the opportunity to attend school (Durnnian, 2018). By making education more affordable, Thailand can reduce dropout rates among ethnic minority students and increase overall educational attainment.

### **6.4 Strengthening Collaboration Between Stakeholders**

Improving education for ethnic minority groups requires collaboration between the government, NGOs, and ethnic communities. NGOs have already played a significant role in providing educational resources and support to minority communities, but more needs to be done to integrate their efforts with government policies and initiatives (Etherton, 2009). By fostering partnerships between these stakeholders, Thailand can develop more effective education programs that address the specific needs of ethnic minority students.

It is also crucial to engage ethnic minority leaders in the policymaking process. These leaders understand the unique challenges faced by their communities and can provide valuable insights into how best to address educational inequality. By involving them in the design and implementation of education policies, the government can ensure that the needs of ethnic minority students are met, and that education programs are culturally relevant and effective (Baker, 2003).

## **7. Conclusion**

### **7.1 Summary of Key Points**

Minority ethnic groups in Thailand face numerous educational challenges that contribute to social and economic inequality. These challenges include language barriers, limited access to quality education, cultural insensitivity in the curriculum, and economic hardships that prevent children from completing their education. Ethnic minority students often struggle academically due to the lack of bilingual



education and the absence of culturally relevant content in their learning experience (Kosonen, 2005). Furthermore, inadequate infrastructure, underqualified teachers, and geographic isolation exacerbate these difficulties, particularly in rural areas (Ng, 2015).

Education plays a crucial role in reducing inequality and promoting social integration for ethnic minorities. By improving access to quality education and ensuring that the curriculum reflects the diversity of Thailand's ethnic communities, the country can create more equitable opportunities for all its citizens. Education not only enhances literacy and academic achievement but also helps to break the cycle of poverty, leading to greater social mobility and better economic prospects for ethnic minority populations (Feingold, 2014).

## 7.2 Final Thoughts

Addressing the educational inequality faced by minority ethnic groups in Thailand requires continued efforts from the government, NGOs, and international organizations. While some progress has been made in improving access to education, there is still a long way to go to ensure that ethnic minority students receive the support and resources they need to succeed. A more inclusive and culturally sensitive education system is essential to meeting the unique needs of these communities and fostering social cohesion in Thailand (Draper, 2015).

To achieve this, policymakers must prioritize bilingual and culturally relevant education, improve school infrastructure in remote areas, and provide financial support for low-income families. By taking these steps, Thailand can create an education system that offers equal opportunities for all, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic background.

## 7.3 Body of Knowledge

The body of knowledge concerning the educational challenges faced by minority ethnic groups in Thailand highlights several key areas that shape the academic experiences and outcomes of these communities. Research consistently points to language barriers as a major obstacle, where the dominance of Thai in the education system creates difficulties for non-Thai-speaking students from groups such as the Karen, Hmong, and Akha (Kosonen, 2005). The lack of bilingual education has been shown to negatively impact both learning outcomes and school retention rates, as ethnic minority students struggle to grasp academic concepts in a language that is not their mother tongue. Moreover, the geographic isolation of many ethnic minority communities, particularly in rural and mountainous areas, exacerbates access to quality education. Schools in these regions often suffer from poor infrastructure, a lack of teaching resources, and underqualified educators who may not be trained in culturally responsive pedagogies (Ng, 2015). Additionally, the



economic disadvantages faced by many minority families further limit educational attainment, as children are often required to work to supplement family income, leading to lower attendance and higher dropout rates (Durnnian, 2018). Collectively, these factors create an environment of educational inequality, where ethnic minority students are less likely to achieve the same level of academic success as their Thai counterparts, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization.

## 8. References

- Baker, C. (2003). Thailand's Assembly of the Poor: Background, drama, reaction. *South East Asia Research*, 11(3), 271-320.  
<https://doi.org/10.5367/000000003101297589>
- Chapman, D. W., & Adams, D. (2002). *The Quality of Education: Dimensions and Strategies*. Asian Development Bank.
- Draper, J. (2015). Language, culture, and identity in Southeast Asia: Approaches to ethnolinguistic minorities. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2015(236), 123-139. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2015-0021>
- Durnnian, T. (2018). Thailand's Hill Tribes: Education and poverty alleviation. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, 7(2), 119-132.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-01-2018-0012>
- Etherton, M. (2009). Education for Indigenous peoples in Thailand: Policy, culture, and rights. *International Review of Education*, 55(5), 599-618.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-009-9148-2>
- Feingold, D. (2014). *The hills are alive with the sound of culture: Reflections on the ethnic minorities of Thailand*. Social Science Research Council.
- Keyes, C. F. (2014). *Finding their voice: Northeastern villagers and the Thai state*. Silkworm Books.
- Kosonen, K. (2005). *Education in local languages: Policy and practice in Southeast Asia*. UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000143041>
- McCarty, T. L. (2011). *The Role of Education in Maintaining and Revitalizing Endangered Languages*. *The Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*. Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195392456.001.0001>
- Ng, P. T. (2015). Equity and Access to Education in Thailand: The Case of Ethnic Minorities. *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 14(2), 24-36. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1090341.pdf>



Schliesinger, J. (2015). Ethnic groups of Thailand: Non-Tai-speaking peoples. White Lotus Press.

UNESCO. (2010). Reaching the Marginalized: Education for All Global Monitoring Report. UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000186606>