



A SWOT Analysis of Early Childhood Educational Institutions in Thailand: Insights for Chinese Immigrant Families

Danni Liu¹, Yudhi Arifani²,

Correspondence:

yudhi.a@mail.rmutk.ac.th

Affiliation:

Department of Education and
Society, Institute of Science
Innovation and Culture,
Rajamangala University of
Technology Krungthep, Bangkok,
Thailand¹²

yudhi.a@mail.rmutk.ac.th

Abstract

This study employs a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework to evaluate the adaptability of Thailand's early childhood education (ECE) institutions in addressing the needs of Chinese immigrant families. Using mixed-methods research, including surveys of 278 families and qualitative interviews, the analysis identifies systemic strengths, such as bilingual programs and cultural inclusivity, alongside critical weaknesses, such as inconsistent educational quality and socioeconomic disparities. Opportunities for improvement include policy reforms and technology integration, while threats center on cultural misalignment and limited parental engagement. The findings advocate for culturally responsive curricula, enhanced teacher training, and equitable funding models to foster inclusive learning environments. This research contributes to global discussions on immigrant education by highlighting the intersection of cultural adaptation, language acquisition, and institutional policy in Thailand's ECE landscape.

Keywords:

Early Childhood Education; SWOT Analysis; Chinese Immigrant Families; Thailand; Bilingual Education; Cultural Adaptation

A. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of early childhood education (ECE) in Thailand has undergone profound transformations over the past three decades, shaped by shifting policy priorities, demographic changes, and globalization. Historically rooted in informal community-based learning—such as temple storytelling and traditional games like takraw—Thailand's ECE system began formalizing in the late 20th century. The 1999 National Education Act marked a watershed moment, legally mandating free education for children aged 0–6 and catalyzing the expansion of public kindergartens nationwide. This legislative shift recognized the critical role of the early years in shaping cognitive, emotional, and social development, aligning Thailand with global trends that emphasize universal access to quality ECE (UNESCO, 2020). However, the implementation of these policies has been uneven, exposing stark disparities between urban and rural regions, public and private institutions, and local versus immigrant populations.

Concurrently, Thailand has emerged as a hub for transnational migration, particularly from China. Driven by economic opportunities, educational aspirations, and familial ties, the Chinese immigrant population in Thailand has grown exponentially, contributing to the nation's multicultural tapestry. According to recent estimates, individuals of Chinese descent constitute approximately 14% of Thailand's population, with concentrated communities in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket (Jiemin, 2017). This demographic shift has introduced complex challenges for Thailand's ECE system, which must now reconcile traditional Thai pedagogies with the cultural and linguistic expectations of Chinese families. For instance, while Thai ECE emphasizes holistic development, mindfulness practices, and communal values, Chinese immigrant families often prioritize academic rigor, discipline, and bilingual proficiency—reflecting Confucian educational philosophies deeply ingrained in their cultural heritage (Chao, 1996). These divergent priorities create friction, as evidenced by parental dissatisfaction with play-based curricula and demands for structured language programs.

The challenges faced by Chinese immigrant families are multifaceted. Language barriers remain a primary obstacle, as many children enter Thai schools with limited proficiency in Thai, the primary medium of instruction. While bilingual programs exist, their availability is concentrated in elite international schools, exacerbating socioeconomic divides. Furthermore, cultural misunderstandings between educators and parents—such as differing views on parental involvement and academic expectations—hinder effective communication. For example, Thai teachers may interpret Chinese parents' emphasis on homework and rankings as excessive pressure, while parents perceive the lack of standardized assessments as indicative of low academic standards (Wong & Lee, 2021). Such tensions underscore the need for institutional adaptability to foster inclusive learning environments that honor diverse cultural identities while promoting social cohesion.

This study seeks to address these issues through a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of Thailand's ECE institutions, with a focus on their capacity to meet the needs of Chinese immigrant families. By examining internal institutional dynamics (e.g., curriculum design, teacher training) and external factors (e.g., policy frameworks, community partnerships), the research aims to identify actionable strategies for enhancing educational equity and cross-cultural integration. The findings hold significance not only for Thailand but also for other nations grappling with the complexities of immigrant education in an increasingly globalized world.

Literature Review

Early Childhood Education in Thailand: Policy and Practice

Thailand's ECE system is characterized by a dualistic structure, split between public institutions serving the majority and private/international schools catering to affluent families. Public kindergartens, governed by the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC), adhere to a national curriculum emphasizing five developmental domains: cognitive, physical, emotional, social, and cultural-moral (OBEC, 2017). Activities often blend modern pedagogies with Thai traditions—such as mindfulness meditation alongside numeracy lessons—to instill a sense of national identity. In contrast, private and international schools adopt globally recognized frameworks such as Reggio Emilia or Montessori, supplemented by bilingual (Thai-English or Thai-Mandarin) programs and cutting-edge technologies, such as interactive whiteboards and VR labs.

Despite progress, systemic inequities persist. Rural areas, particularly in provinces like Mae Sot and Surin, face chronic underfunding, with 70% of educators working without formal contracts and relying on outdated teaching materials (UNESCO, 2019). NGOs and grassroots initiatives have attempted to bridge these gaps through innovative approaches, such as mobile preschools housed in repurposed tuk-tuks and community-led curricula incorporating local folklore. However, such efforts remain fragmented, highlighting the need for centralized policy interventions (Arifah et al. 2025).

Chinese Immigrant Families: Educational Challenges and Cultural Dynamics

Chinese immigration to Thailand, dating back to the Ayutthaya Kingdom, has historically been driven by trade and labor. However, the 21st century has seen a surge in middle-class families seeking educational opportunities, spurred by Thailand's reputation for affordable international schools and its proximity to China. These families bring distinct educational expectations shaped by China's exam-centric system, which prioritizes rote memorization, discipline, and early academic achievement (Zhao, 2014). Such values clash with Thailand's child-centered, play-based approach, leading to parental frustration and, in some cases, withdrawal from the formal education system in favor of private tutoring or homeschooling.

Language acquisition poses another critical challenge. While Thai is the primary instructional language, many Chinese households maintain Mandarin or regional dialects (e.g., Cantonese or Hokkien) as their home language, creating a linguistic divide. Research indicates that children with limited Thai proficiency face social isolation and academic underperformance, as language

skills are closely tied to cognitive development and peer interaction (Cummins, 2000). Schools often lack resources to address these issues, with only 23% of public institutions offering structured language support for non-native speakers (OECD, 2018).

Bilingual Education: Cognitive Benefits and Institutional Barriers

Bilingualism, when effectively supported, offers cognitive advantages such as enhanced problem-solving skills, metalinguistic awareness, and cognitive flexibility (Bialystok, 2011). In Thailand, however, bilingual programs are disproportionately available in urban international schools, where fees can exceed 300,000 THB annually—a prohibitive cost for most families. Public schools, constrained by budgetary limitations, rarely provide dual-language instruction beyond basic vocabulary drills. This inequity perpetuates a cycle where affluent students gain linguistic and cultural capital, while others struggle to achieve fluency in either Thai or their heritage language (Nayaka, Oo, & Than, 2025).

Qualitative studies reveal that even in schools offering bilingual curricula, implementation is often superficial. For example, Mandarin classes may focus on rote memorization of characters rather than communicative competence, and cultural activities—such as Lunar New Year celebrations—are treated as tokenistic rather than integrated into daily pedagogy (Chen, 2022). These shortcomings underscore the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality.

SWOT Analysis in Educational Research: A Framework for Institutional Evaluation

SWOT analysis, a strategic planning tool developed in business contexts, has gained traction in educational research for its utility in diagnosing institutional adaptability (Gürel & Tat, 2017). By categorizing factors as Strengths (internal advantages), Weaknesses (internal limitations), Opportunities (external prospects), and Threats (external challenges), the framework provides a structured approach to evaluating complex systems. In the context of ECE, strengths might include experienced teachers or robust community partnerships, while weaknesses could involve inadequate funding or outdated facilities. Opportunities may arise from policy changes or technological advancements, whereas threats could encompass demographic shifts or socioeconomic inequalities.

Recent applications of SWOT analysis in education highlight its versatility. For instance, Thomas et al. (2014) employed the framework to assess peer review systems in higher education, while Longhurst et al. (2020) adapted it to evaluate pandemic-induced shifts in anatomical education. In immigrant education contexts, SWOT analysis helps disentangle the interplay of cultural, linguistic, and institutional factors, offering actionable insights for policymakers. However, critics argue that the model's simplicity may overlook nuanced dynamics, such as power imbalances between stakeholders or the long-term impacts of systemic racism (Helms & Nixon, 2010).

Research Gaps

Despite growing interest in immigrant education, few studies focus on Chinese families in Southeast Asia, particularly in non-Western ECE systems. The existing literature predominantly examines immigrant experiences in Europe or North America, where policy frameworks and cultural contexts differ markedly from those in Thailand (Li & Wang, 2021). Additionally, while bilingualism is widely studied, research often neglects the role of heritage languages in identity formation among young children. This study addresses these gaps by centering Thai-Chinese intercultural dynamics and advocating for context-specific solutions.

Theoretically, this research contributes to two intersecting discourses: multicultural education and decolonizing pedagogies. By challenging the hegemony of Western educational models—which often dominate international school curricula—it advocates for hybrid approaches that honor local traditions while accommodating immigrant identities. For example, the Montessori-Buddhist model observed in Ayutthaya demonstrates how global best practices can be adapted to reflect Thai values, offering a blueprint for culturally sustainable education.

B. METHODS

The research employed a mixed-methods design to holistically evaluate the adaptability of Thailand's early childhood education (ECE) institutions in addressing the needs of Chinese immigrant families. This approach integrated quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, enabling data triangulation and a deeper understanding of systemic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The study targeted Chinese immigrant families residing in urban and suburban regions of Thailand, including Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and provinces with significant Chinese populations. A stratified random sampling method was utilized to ensure representation across three primary types of educational institutions: public schools (41%), private schools (31%), and international schools (28%). This stratification accounted for socioeconomic diversity, as public schools predominantly serve lower-income families, while international schools cater to higher-income households.

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire comprising 36 Likert-scale items, designed to assess parental perceptions of institutional strengths (e.g., bilingual programs, cultural inclusivity), weaknesses (e.g., language barriers, resource gaps), opportunities (e.g., policy reforms, technology integration), and threats (e.g., socioeconomic disparities, cultural misalignment). The questionnaire was distributed in both Mandarin and Thai to accommodate linguistic diversity, with bilingual research assistants available to clarify ambiguities. A pilot study involving 30 families was conducted to refine question phrasing and ensure cultural sensitivity, resulting in minor adjustments to avoid ethnocentric biases. The final survey achieved Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.83–0.91 across subscales, indicating strong internal consistency.

Participants

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 20 Chinese immigrant parents and 15 ECE educators, selected via purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives. Interview protocols explored themes such as parental involvement, adequacy of teacher training, and challenges in cross-cultural communication. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes, was conducted in participants' preferred language (Mandarin, Thai, or English), and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis. To enhance credibility, member checking was performed by sharing summaries with participants for verification.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a sequential explanatory approach. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS 26.0, beginning with descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) to summarize demographic variables and SWOT-related perceptions. ANOVA tests were conducted to compare responses across subgroups, such as residency duration (<1 year, 1–3 years, >3 years) and school type. Factor analysis (principal component extraction with Varimax rotation) identified latent constructs within the SWOT framework, confirming the validity of the survey's thematic structure. Qualitative data were analyzed through inductive thematic coding in NVivo 12, identifying recurring patterns such as "cultural dissonance in pedagogy" and "resource inequities." Codes were iteratively refined through constant comparison, and representative quotes were extracted to contextualize quantitative findings. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, anonymizing data, and securing approval from Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep's Institutional Review Board (IRB-2023-ECE-014).

C. RESULT & DISCUSSION

The study revealed nuanced insights into the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats shaping Thailand's ECE landscape for Chinese immigrant families. Strengths were most prominently observed in bilingual adaptability and cultural integration initiatives. Approximately 68% of parents rated bilingual programs as effective (mean = 3.75/5, SD = 1.04), with international schools outperforming public institutions (mean = 4.10 vs. 3.58; $p < 0.05$). Parents highlighted initiatives such as dual-language storybooks and Thai-Mandarin cultural festivals as

critical to fostering cross-cultural understanding. For instance, one parent noted, “My child sings Thai folk songs at home but also writes Chinese characters—this balance makes me feel connected to both cultures.” Urban schools, particularly in Bangkok, leveraged technology like interactive whiteboards to enhance language acquisition, though rural areas lagged due to limited infrastructure.

Weaknesses centered on language barriers and inconsistent educational quality. Despite institutional efforts, 55% of parents reported difficulties communicating with teachers, citing limited Thai proficiency (mean = 3.72/5, SD = 1.07). This issue was exacerbated in rural regions, where 70% of educators lacked formal training in multicultural education. A teacher in Chiang Mai admitted, “We use Google Translate for progress reports, but it often misrepresents nuanced feedback.” Additionally, resource disparities were stark: rural schools relied on outdated materials, such as 1980s-era textbooks, while urban international schools utilized AI-driven language apps. ANOVA results confirmed significant differences in perceived quality between urban and rural institutions ($F = 12.08$, $p = 0.000$).

Opportunities emerged in policy reforms and technological innovation. Over 60% of participants endorsed government proposals to fund multilingual teacher training (mean = 3.83/5, SD = 0.99). Pilot programs in Phuket and Nonthaburi demonstrated the potential of VR technology to bridge experiential gaps; for example, urban students virtually visited rubber plantations, while rural peers explored Bangkok museums via 360-degree videos. Qualitative interviews underscored the demand for hybrid curricula blending Thai and Chinese pedagogical philosophies. One administrator described a successful Montessori-Buddhist program in Ayutthaya, where children “choose activities freely but also care for temple animals to build karma.”

Threats were predominantly socioeconomic and cultural. Tuition fees at international schools averaged 250,000 THB annually, excluding uniforms and extracurriculars, rendering them inaccessible to 65% of surveyed families. Regression analysis revealed a strong correlation between income level and perceived educational quality ($\beta = 0.42$, $p = 0.001$). Cultural clashes also posed risks: competitive learning models in Chiang Rai schools sparked parental backlash, as one mother explained, “Thai teachers prioritize group harmony, but Chinese parents want individual rankings.” Such dissonance correlated with lower parental involvement in public schools (mean = 3.24/5 vs. 4.05 in international schools; $p = 0.032$).

Demographic variations further nuanced these findings. Families residing in Thailand for over three years reported higher satisfaction (mean = 4.05/5) than newcomers (mean = 3.56; $p < 0.01$), suggesting acculturation mitigates initial integration challenges. Conversely, single-parent households faced compounded barriers, with 40% citing financial strain and limited time for school engagement. Thematic analysis of interviews highlighted systemic gaps, such as a lack of standardized protocols for addressing bullying related to cultural differences. A grandmother in Pattaya lamented, “My granddaughter was teased for bringing century eggs to lunch—teachers did not know how to intervene.”

In summary, the results underscore the duality of Thailand’s ECE system: while innovative programs and bilingualism offer pathways for integration, structural inequities and cultural misunderstandings persist. These findings align with global studies on immigrant education, which consistently identify resource allocation and teacher preparedness as determinants of success (Britto et al., 2011; OECD, 2018). The data advocate for targeted interventions, particularly in rural regions, to align Thailand’s ECE system with the evolving needs of its multicultural population.

The findings of this study illuminate the dual role of Thailand’s early childhood education (ECE) system as both a facilitator and barrier to the integration of Chinese immigrant families. By employing a SWOT framework, the research identifies critical strengths, such as bilingual adaptability and cultural inclusivity, alongside systemic weaknesses, including language barriers and inconsistent educational quality. These insights underscore the need for targeted interventions to bridge gaps and foster equitable learning environments.

One of the most significant strengths of Thailand's ECE system lies in its bilingual programs, which have been instrumental in supporting the language acquisition and cultural adaptation of Chinese immigrant children. Families in urban centers, particularly those enrolled in international schools, reported high satisfaction with dual-language curricula, citing improved Thai proficiency and enhanced cognitive flexibility as key benefits. For example, a parent in Bangkok noted, "My child can switch between Thai and Mandarin effortlessly, which gives her confidence in both academic and social settings." These programs not only facilitate linguistic development but also serve as a bridge between cultural identities, fostering a sense of belonging among immigrant children.

Cultural integration initiatives, such as community festivals and parent workshops, further strengthen the ECE system's capacity to accommodate diverse populations. Schools that actively celebrate Chinese traditions—such as Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival—while incorporating Thai customs create inclusive environments where children feel valued. A teacher in Chiang Mai described how a multicultural fair, featuring traditional dances and cuisine from both cultures, "broke down barriers and sparked meaningful conversations among students and parents." Such initiatives align with global best practices in multicultural education, which emphasize honoring students' heritage while promoting cross-cultural understanding (UNESCO, 2020).

Opportunities for improvement are equally promising. Policy reforms aimed at funding multilingual teacher training and expanding bilingual programs to rural areas could significantly enhance educational equity. Pilot projects in Phuket and Nonthaburi have already demonstrated the potential of technology, such as VR-based cultural exchanges, to bridge urban-rural divides. For instance, a VR program that allows rural students to virtually explore Bangkok museums while their urban peers visit rubber plantations has been lauded for fostering empathy and shared learning experiences. These innovations, coupled with government support, could transform Thailand's ECE system into a model for multicultural integration.

Despite these strengths, the study reveals persistent weaknesses that hinder the system's adaptability. Language barriers remain a formidable obstacle, particularly for families in rural areas where Thai proficiency is limited. A grandmother in Surin shared, "I struggle to help my grandson with his homework because I do not understand Thai, and his teachers do not speak Mandarin." This communication gap not only affects academic performance but also limits parental involvement, a critical factor in children's educational success (Chen, 2022).

Inconsistent educational quality further exacerbates these challenges. While urban international schools boast state-of-the-art facilities and highly trained staff, rural public schools often lack basic resources, such as textbooks and certified teachers. A teacher in Nakhon Phanom lamented, "We use rice sacks as math tools because we cannot afford proper materials." Such disparities perpetuate cycles of inequality, leaving rural students—many of whom are from low-income immigrant families—at a significant disadvantage.

Threats to the system's sustainability are equally concerning. Socioeconomic disparities, reflected in the high tuition fees of international schools, exclude a majority of Chinese immigrant families from accessing quality bilingual education. Regression analysis revealed a strong correlation between income level and perceived educational quality ($\beta = 0.42$, $p = 0.001$), highlighting the urgent need for equitable funding models. Cultural misalignment also poses risks, as differing educational philosophies create friction between parents and educators. For example, a mother in Chiang Rai expressed frustration with the lack of academic rigor, stating, "Thai teachers focus on play, but I want my child to excel in math and science."

To address these challenges, the study proposes a multi-pronged approach centered on policy reform, teacher training, and community engagement. First, the Thai government should allocate a larger portion of the education budget to rural ECE initiatives, ensuring equitable access to resources and bilingual programs. This could include subsidies for low-income families and incentives for teachers to work in underserved areas.

Second, teacher training programs must incorporate modules on cultural competency and multilingual education. By equipping educators with the skills to navigate cross-cultural

dynamics, schools can better support immigrant children's linguistic and social development. For instance, a pilot training program in Ayutthaya that combined Montessori methods with Buddhist principles successfully bridged cultural divides and improved student outcomes.

Third, fostering community partnerships is essential for creating inclusive learning environments. Schools should collaborate with local NGOs and immigrant associations to organize workshops, language classes, and cultural events that engage parents and promote mutual understanding. A successful example is a Bangkok-based initiative where Mandarin-speaking parents volunteered to teach Chinese calligraphy. In contrast, Thai parents shared traditional recipes, fostering a sense of shared ownership and belonging.

D. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of Thailand's ECE system in shaping the educational trajectories of Chinese immigrant children. While bilingual programs and cultural integration initiatives offer pathways for inclusion, systemic inequities and cultural misunderstandings persist, particularly in rural areas. The findings advocate for a holistic approach to reform, combining policy interventions, teacher training, and community engagement to create equitable and inclusive learning environments.

By addressing these challenges, Thailand has the potential to transform its ECE system into a global model for multicultural education. As one parent aptly summarized, "Education is the bridge that connects our past to our future. If we build it well, our children will walk confidently into a world that values their heritage and their potential." This vision, grounded in equity and inclusivity, must guide future efforts to ensure that every child—regardless of background—has the opportunity to succeed.

Theoretical Contributions and Future Directions

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on immigrant education by highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Chinese families in Thailand's ECE system. It advances theoretical frameworks for analyzing multicultural education in non-Western contexts, emphasizing the importance of hybrid pedagogies that honor local traditions while accommodating immigrant identities. The findings also underscore the need to decolonize educational practices, challenge the hegemony of Western models, and advocate for context-specific solutions.

Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of culturally responsive curricula and the impact of digital tools on language acquisition. Additionally, comparative studies across Southeast Asia could provide insights into regional trends and best practices. By addressing these gaps, scholars and policymakers can work together to build inclusive ECE systems that empower all children to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

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