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DOI
10.1007/978-3-319-93812-7_4

Publication date
2019

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Sustainable Peacebuilding and Social Justice in Times of Transition

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Shah, R., & Lopes Cardozo, M. T. A. (2019). Myanmar's Education System: Historical Roots, the Current Context, and New Opportunities. In M. T. A. Lopes Cardozo, & E. J. T. Maber (Eds.), *Sustainable Peacebuilding and Social Justice in Times of Transition: Findings on the Role of Education in Myanmar* (pp. 65-86). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93812-7_4

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Download date:08 Nov 2026

Chapter 4
Myanmar's Education System: Historical Roots, the Current Context, and New Opportunities

Ritesh Shah and Mieke T. A. Lopes Cardozo

Introduction

According to Lorch (2007), Myanmar's contemporary education system is symptomatic of a weak state where institutions are unable to provide for the welfare of its citizens. Paradoxically, this has led to a flourishing number of quasi and non-state actors filling the void. This includes the strengthening/re-establishment of a range of parallel systems, including: monastic and faith-based schools that have been partially co-opted into the state system; separate ethnic minority schools/systems that have been given space for manoeuvre due to cease-fire pacts signed since 1989; a flourishing private education system; and numerous INGO and NGO actors who have established small-scale, non-formal education projects around the fringes of state provision (particularly in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and tertiary spaces). The consequences of this multitude of actors and providers are further considered in this section—in relation to access, quality and equity—to understand the current issues and concerns plaguing the system at present.

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M. T. A. Lopes Cardozo, E. J. T. Maber (eds.), *Sustainable Peacebuilding and Social Justice in Times of Transition*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93812-7_4

Historical Development and Evolution of a National Education System

Pre-colonial Monastic/Sangha-Led Education

Prior to colonisation, education was largely the responsibility of the monasteries. Monastic education is recorded to have started as early as the eleventh century amongst the lowland Theravada Buddhist population, and specifically amongst the (majority) Bamar ethnic group. Such education was typically rural and community-based, decentralised, and open to all boys irrespective of their class or background. While the education provided in these schools was generally free, the *Sangha* itself typically relied on the community for all its needs.[1] Important about monastic education, was the strong ideological foundation on which it was founded. A key aim of such education according to Cheesman (2010, 48–49) was to "'civilise' non-Buddhist groups into extending into the peripheral territories as a means to assimilate people into the lowland polities." For this reason, monastic education played a key function in pre-colonial Myanmar as, "…an explicit link between the people and their religion, and by extension, their state. It transmitted standardized cultural and intellectual matters across all sectors of society. It instilled a valuable sense of discipline that allowed rulers to maintain control over their subjects and reinforced a respect for tradition and hierarchy" (Cheesman 2010, 49). Amongst the majority Buddhist population, monastic schools were highly effective in supporting the development of basic literacy skills in Burmese and Pali languages, and important elements of Buddhist doctrine.

British Colonial 'Western' Education

The British colonial administration established an alternative to monasteries as the primary place of learning. Mass 'Western' style education, predicated on the teaching of English language, was promoted and supported by the colonial administration. Graduates of these schools soon made their way into government service, to the exclusion of traditional leaders. Monastic schools quickly lost their prestige to the English language, church/government run schools and became seen as the poor man's bastion (Cheesman 2010, 51), and the colonial education system formed part of the British 'divide and rule' tactics (Lwin 2000). This contributed to a decline in demand for education in general, as most Burmese lacked access to the few English schools that had been set up. Firstly, this was due to the high fees and related costs involved, and secondly, some also questioned if they wanted to participate in this colonial education system (Lwin 2000). Literacy rates across the British

[1] The Sangha is the centuries-old Buddhist monastic order that historically played a key role in governing the monastic school system (Cheesman 2010: 45).

administered areas dropped markedly. Some attempts were made by the British to co-opt monastic schools into the education system, through the provision of grants-in-aid, and roving teachers to provide instruction in additional subjects to those typically taught. Monastic schools viewed such involvement with suspicion and maintained an arm's length from the colonial administration. In response, the administration set about constructing a greater number of vernacular language schools that aimed to undermine the power and reach of monastic schools (Lwin 2000).

1930s Multi-tier System

What resulted by the 1930s was a multi-tiered system of schooling distinguished primarily by language of instruction and locus of control: (1) vernacular schools (either Burmese or a recognised local language) that were run by local authorities; (2) monastic schools which remained completely outside the state system; (3) vernacular/English schools run by the colonial administration; and (4) English only, private schools run by the church. Vernacular and monastic schools remained the only schooling opportunity open for the masses. Teachers in these schools, however, were often less well qualified academically and poorly remunerated for their services. The end of colonial rule in 1948 stratified education along several lines. Firstly, by loyalties or opposition to the colonial government, with monastic schools increasingly seen as the bastions of Burmese nationalism. Secondly, stratification happened by language of instruction, and thirdly, by educational opportunities and outcomes. As Lwin (2000, 5) notes, "[colonial education] did not guarantee equality of opportunity in education for all children," and instead education during this time was marked by high levels of polarization and alienation.

Post-WW II

Following WWII, a process of educational rehabilitation commenced and was financed out of the British military budget. In 1947, a report commissioned by the educational rehabilitation committee was released and proposed a significant overhaul of the entire Burmese education system. Underpinning the reform was an idea that education should be more accessible, adaptable and available to a greater proportion of the population through the introduction of free, compulsory, universal primary education.[2] Key recommendations included: (1) the abolishment of the three-tiered systems of education and consolidation of all schools and teachers into a state-controlled, provisioned and managed system; (2) free education for all citizens at the primary and post-primary levels (up to end of Standard IX or children

[2] Lwin notes in the post-WWII period the compulsory component of this ambition was deferred in recognition that teachers needed to be trained, schools provided and resources afforded.

15 years of age) and state subsidization of higher education; (3) an overhaul of the curriculum to introduce subjects that reflect the agrarian and rural lifestyle of most of the population, as well as religious education (i.e. Buddhism); (4) the promotion of Burmese and English as equal languages of instruction, but with a recommendation that indigenous vernacular languages be the language of instruction in situations where neither of the above languages was the predominant one in the communities served; and (5) a proposition to shift assessment regimes away from an examination-focus towards a portfolio of student progress through a report card system (Lwin 2000).

Post 1948 Independence

After Burma achieved independence in 1948, the recommendations from this report were considered in the creation of the new nation's national education system. Elements adopted included an insistence on Burmese as the language of instruction, with English adopted as a second language of instruction from the fifth standards, and establishment of primary (infant to fourth standard), middle (infant to seventh standard) and complete teaching units (infant to ninth standard). A system of free education for all students in the state system was also instituted, and the notion of compulsory education was piloted in the capital Rangoon. In 1953, education was included as a key priority sector within the government's Welfare state plans with the ambition that education support all citizens to gain literacy skills, support national reconstruction, imbue a sense of citizenship/allegiance towards the nation, and perpetuate practices of democracy. Additionally, a new curriculum was instituted which reorganized the education system into three levels: primary, middle and high school stages.[3] Non-state education providers, specifically private schools, Christian schools and Buddhist monastic schools were accepted and integrated into the post-independence system and given permission to maintain their autonomy under the 1951 Private Schools Act. These providers maintained approaches, including the teaching of English from an earlier age, the inclusion of religious education within the curriculum, and a focus on academic (or religious) education versus vocational education, which maintained the semblance of the stratified system that existed prior to independence. Thus, while access to education improved in this period, inequities within the system were maintained and as Lwin (2000) contends, were potentially exacerbated along new fault lines—between academic (private)

[3] Curriculum content was reoriented towards "practical and prevocational subjects" and a focus on fostering co-operative living promoted. At middle and high school levels, pre-vocational and vocational subjects were developed but differentiated along gender and local needs. The new policy also specified that only one vernacular language—Burmese—would be the medium of instruction, with English introduced as a compulsory second language from post-primary onwards (Lwin 2000).

and vocational (public) schools, medium of instruction, urban-rural (on access, opportunity and requirements for compulsion), and gender.

Military Regime's Impact on Education After 1962

Following the country's military coup and installation of military rule in 1962, the direction and focus of education changed radically. Underpinning the new government's vision for education was the idea that it would promote livelihood opportunities, be founded in socialist moral values, and give precedence to science. Implicit in the government's plans for education was a clear push for the modernization imperative. Priority was given to subjects that were perceived to advance economic growth and development, such as medicine, engineering and other math and science based disciplines, particularly at the university level. Barring Buddhist monastic schools in rural areas, all other types of non-state schools were nationalized (Lwin 2000). Over time, however, monastic schools were also more tightly regulated and controlled by the state. All *Sangha* were required to register with the government and accept ongoing state oversight, and later were centralized under the control of one common council. These policies served to reduce the power of individual monks and more tightly ascribe the educational programs within monastic schools to only teaching its own novices (Cheesman 2010). By 1980, according to Martin (2013 186), "the education activities of monks was monitored and censored, as was the curriculum." In 1993, the government recognized that it could not effectively provide mass education to all, and opened the door to monastic schools teaching to a wider section of the community. New monastic schools were required to open under the provision that they register themselves with the government.

This has led to monastic schools today falling into one of two categories: (1) those that confine themselves to Buddhist teachings and/or include the teaching of some basic literacy skills but remain outside of state control; and (2) those that have adopted the government curriculum, are registered with the MoE and Ministry of Religious Affairs, and have in essence, become part of the formal education systems (Lorch 2008). The impacts of this second category of schools in terms of educational quality, access, and equity are discussed in the next section.

After 1962, Burmese was affirmed as the language of instruction and, with occasional variances, little space was given to the inclusion of other indigenous vernacular languages. A narrative was developed in the curriculum during the military regime that focused on stressing the "Burmanness" of the nation, stressing Burmese culture as the norm of national identity, and important for the sake of national unity (Walton 2013; Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012). This sense of identity also extended to religious identity. While post-independence regimes had sought for the secularization of schooling, the government's platform of socialism included in it the blending of material and religious elements of society. In schools, this extended to students paying homage on a daily basis to 'Five Gratitudes' that included Buddha, Dhamma, and Sanga as well as teachers and parents.

According to Callahan (2003 cited in Lall and South 2013), the precedent set during this time worked to assimilate and disempower ethnic minorities. From an early age, education quickly became a politicized mechanism for the military state to "prevent children from learning how to think" by "invok[ing] ideas of loyalty and the image of obedient citizens" (Lwin 2000, 15–16). This, according to Walton (2013) has been "one of the main grievances underlying more than half a century of armed ethnic conflict", and has precipitated the growth of schools that have been set up by various armed ethnic resistance groups. This is again discussed in the next section.

Schooling Structure Dating Back to the Military Regime Period

It was during this time that the structure of schooling that remains in existence until today took shape. The schooling sector was split into three distinct components:

- Primary education (the first 5 years of schooling from Standard 0 (KG) to Standard IV);
- Middle schooling (the subsequent 4 years from Standard V to VIII);
- And high school (final 2 years of schooling from Standard IX to X).

With passage of the 1974 Constitution, primary education was compulsory, middle school semi-compulsory, and high school dependent on the will of the student (Martin 2013, 180; Lwin 2000). In primary school, subjects included as part of the curriculum were Burmese, English, mathematics, history and geography. Science was introduced as part of middle school with the same subjects continuing through high school. In general, this schooling curriculum and structure was deemed to give primacy to particular types of academic knowledge, rather than the development of life, vocational, moral or citizenship skills (Lwin 2000).

Students were required to sit exams at the end of each standard and given a "pass-fail" mark. In Standard VIII, at the end of middle schooling, a high stakes assessment was introduced which determined the future academic trajectories student could take—those that did well (A-list students) could go onto studying science subjects in high school, while those who didn't were relegated to arts subjects.[4] Similarly at Standard X, another high stakes exam was introduced and results determined if one could go onto university or were relegated to vocational streams. This examination regime stratified the education system, and acted to slot students into particular life trajectories from an early age (Lwin 2000). It also informed the nature of teaching practices in the classroom, and focused attention on the rote learning of facts through memorization and a culture of competition rather than collaboration. Examinations also became an instrument of the military, with students who were

[4] According to Lwin (2000) this was later changed so that irrespective of marks, students could continue to take classes in both the arts and sciences stream in to high school.

members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a group with loyalties to the regime, awarded 16 extra marks (Lwin 2000, 16).

Banned/Restricted Higher Education Post 1988

The tertiary sector in particular, has evolved in a politicized fashion. Against the backdrop of the country's 1988 'Democratization' movement, tertiary students, especially those studying in urban institutions, engaged in mass protests. This led to universities frequently being shut – sometimes as long as a decade – by the government, and students becoming subject to persecution (Maber 2014; Lall 2008).[5] It also led to staff and students in higher education being closely monitored (Martin 2013).

As a way to reduce the perceived threat coming from this group of educated youth, under the guise of promoting "equitable educational development" the government over time acted to increase the number of tertiary institutes, yet at the same time fragment them by discipline and location, with the belief that it would reduce civil unrest this way (Tin 2000; Martin 2013). The government has also promoted distance education programs, moved undergraduate study programs away from urban areas, and relocated universities to new sites in a ploy to disperse a 'critical mass' of dissent (Lall 2008, 132). Rangoon University, one of the country's first tertiary institutes, was split in half so that it no longer offered programs in medicine, teaching and engineering. Various Ministries as well as the Civil Service Selection and Training Board were given the authority to establish single discipline universities. The military, for example, has established institutes for engineering and science for students in the military circle, which were generally better resourced and of enhanced quality in comparison to others. The government has also acted to limit participation of ethnic minority groups in higher education. For example, those who are unable to prove their citizenship according to the country's 1982 Citizenship law, are effectively barred from gaining entry into universities.[6] For the ethnic Chinese and Indian populations of the country, this has effectively limited their options for tertiary study, and even when successful in gaining entry, these groups are often precluded from studying professional subjects like technology and medicine (Lwin 2000, 10).

[5] For example, following the 1988 student protests, all universities were shut for a period of 2 years, and further strikes during the 1990s led to a series of closure that in total amounted to 3 years. In Yangon, universities were shut for 10 out of 12 years between 1988 and 2000 (Lall 2008).

[6] This law specifies that citizenship is only available to those who can prove ancestry resident in Burma prior to the first British annexation in 1824. It makes it nearly impossible for ethnic Chinese and Indian inhabitants of the country to gain full citizenship and instead remain in the country on Foreign Registration Cards.

Current Parallel Systems of State, Non-state and Non-formal Forms of Education

Currently, schooling in Myanmar operates within multiple sectors, the largest being the government administered state sector through which the Ministry of Education is responsible for providing basic education. Over 47,000 schools provide education to students at primary, lower-secondary/middle, and upper-secondary levels, with approximate enrolment given below (Table 4.1).

Outside of the state system, monastic, ethnic and community-based schools (the latter two not represented in the data table above) play an important role in offering access to non-state education for children who may otherwise have none. These are outlined briefly below.

Monastic Schools

Monastic schools operate in all states and regions across the country, with over 1500 schools registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), serving around 300,000 children (Government of Myanmar 2016). Most monastic schools offer primary education but some cover the middle and high school grades. Those that are registered use the official state primary and middle school curricula, but also teach about Buddhist culture and way of life. Because no fees are charged and food is provided, these schools are able to reach some of the poorest children. They cater primarily to poor children in the communities in which monasteries are located, including orphans, children of migrant workers and those sent away from remote areas (UNICEF 2012). Some schools are also able to teach children to read and write in their own ethnic languages, which makes them an attractive alternative for ethnic minority groups (Cheesman 2003). Most monastic schools teach novices and put children together and provide their educational services regardless of race and religion. Monastic schools are often more affordable, making use of donations for food, clothing and classroom resources and can provide a more accessible learning environment to those less able to access the state sector due to cost, accessibility and social exclusion. They do not require parents to purchase uniforms or books, but do

Table 4.1 Number of schools and students across the education sector (Government of Myanmar 2016)

	No. of schools	No. of students
Upper secondary	3513	0.9 million
Lower secondary	6224	2.8 million
Basic education	35,650	5.1 million
Monastic schools	1538	0.3 million
Private schools	438	0.1 million

sometimes require parents to pool their funds to pay for teachers or build facilities (Lall 2011).

While monastic schools are important in improving access to education, the same issues around educational quality in terms of class sizes, teacher qualifications/capacity and curriculum materials that exists in the state system, also manifest themselves in this sector (Cheesman 2003; Lorch 2008; Lall 2011). There is also a question of whether monastic schools also have an indoctrinating agenda behind them. Some monastic schools have been set up as a direct response to the establishment of schools run by Christian churches or mosques, and are established specifically to counter or even prevent the growth of these minority religions. Some monastic orphanages require every child who wants to live in their compound to wear a Buddhist novice's robe. Even in orphanages where this is not the case, Christian or Muslim children are sometimes encouraged to convert to Buddhism (Lorch 2008, 157). In light of our analytical lenses on the 4Rs, and processes of transformation towards peacebuilding, a deeper understanding of the role of faith-based education in Monastic schools and beyond is essential in order to further understand how issues of identity-formation (recognition), tolerance and intergroup understanding and living together with 'others' (reconciliation) are playing out.

Ethnic Minority-Run Schools

In ethnic minority and remote areas of the country a number of community, quasi-state or (I)NGO established educational schools have also been set up, which are not officially registered or accounted for by the state (and in official data as reflected in Table 4.2). This is largely because of a lack of comprehensive data on this sector, signalling the very loose associations these schools have historically had with the state as a product of ethnic-based conflicts (Government of Myanmar 2016, 100). In some instances, communities have established these schools in response to a lack of proximate access to government educational facilities. Communities will often self-fund and/or nominate a teacher from within to operate the school. Depending on the degree to which these schools are co-opted by the state to supplement education provision, communities are afforded some autonomy within these settings to deviate from the official curriculum and provide work and life skills to their students that are locally relevant. These community-based schools are increasingly of interest to

Table 4.2 Enrolment rates in ethnic schools (Jolliffe 2014)

State	No. of schools	No. of students
Kachin	279	23,000
Kayah	505	50,351
Kayin	1294	141,623
Mon	142	13,000
Shan	200+	*unknown*

donors, particularly UNESCO, who have pushed for the strengthening and/or establishment of these institutions as a mechanism of promoting non-formal education at the local level (Lorch 2008). Additionally, in many ethnic minority areas, resistance groups have managed to set up and administer their own schooling systems. Some examples of this are schools being run by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), and the Karen National Union (KNU). In these areas, the schools were set up as a direct response to the perceived marginalization that these ethnic groups encountered within the state system. There are at least 2420 ethnic schools across primary, middle and high school levels serving upwards of 228,000 students (Jolliffe 2014):

These parallel ethnic school systems vary significantly across the states in terms of size and the number of constituents they serve, their access to resources and sources of funding, and their approaches to curriculum design.

For many in this alternative schooling system, the teaching of identity, language and history (and in some cases religion) of the ethnic group are particularly stressed within the curriculum. Such curriculum also aims to valorize the ethno-nationalist struggle against the state (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012). Teachers who could teach these subjects were locally recruited and employed, relevant curriculum resources and texts developed, and separate education departments established. Additional ethnic education programs are also run through churches or monastic schools in these areas (Lall and South 2013). However, not all ethnic states in conflict have parallel education systems; communities in states such as Chin and Rakhine rely primarily on government schools for education provision.

At present, one of the significant questions is how this sector of non-state provision can be effectively integrated into the government's ambitions for education reform. The NESP identifies a key challenge being,

> …the extent to which they are mainstreamed in other organizations involved in basic education provision, such as monastic schools, private sector schools, community-based schools, schools funded by non-governmental organizations and schools managed under ethnic education systems. Therefore, the MOE needs an effective partnership mechanism in place that brings these organizations together to share information and explore opportunities for collaboration. Effective co-ordination between the MOE and these organizations has the potential to make a significant positive contribution to the achievement of the NESP goal[s]. (Government of Myanmar 2016, 92)

The issue for the ethnic education authorities, however, is a fear that this drive for coordination might lead to the wholescale co-opting of their systems by the state, which effectively reduces the autonomy and independence for which they have long fought. This tension is explored in greater depth in the next chapter.

Alternative Non-formal Education

A sector that has been severely neglected by the state is non-formal education (NFE). In a society where almost 50% of children do not complete basic education, and where the vulnerable youth population may lack important livelihood and literacy

skills, the fact that access to alternative education pathways is limited is a concern. According to UNICEF (2012), there has been no NFE budget or dedicated directorate within the Ministry set up to support this. Instead, provision has largely fallen on civil society, in particular NGOs and the international community. Lorch (2008) notes how a number of NGOs are involved in vocational or life skills training for youth, an observation which is supported by our own data collection and analysis when looking at education initiatives for youth (Chaps. 8, 9, and 10). Many target poorly educated school leavers or dropouts, and aim to support these individuals' entry into the labour market. These programs often lack recognition within government and are vulnerable to funding ebbs and flows from international donors. The piecemeal and small-scale nature of these initiatives often makes scale-up difficult, and as a result a large population of youth remain underserved by such initiatives (UNICEF 2012).

Passage of the new National Education Law in 2014, however, has begun to change this situation, by recognizing the role of NFE in Myanmar's education system, and also identifying its relevance and importance for the millions of children currently out of school. Chap. 5 of the law specifies the need for the Ministry to: (1) encourage implementation of out of school programs with non-state providers; (2) implement basic literacy programs; (3) provide equivalency programs for out of school children so they can re-integrate into the formal education system or access technical vocational education and (4) provide continuous learning opportunities, including self-learning education to improve citizens' knowledge and skills. Following on this, the NESP (2016, 160) sets a target of ensuring that, "learners will be able to access and graduate from quality assured, certified and nationally credentialed alternative education programs," signaling a stronger role for the state in recognizing, regulating and expanding opportunities in this area. How this unfolds in practice is still to be seen, but the fact that projections in the NESP signal a budget allocation for non-formal education provision that is 400% higher in 2017–2018 than it has been in previous years is an encouraging sign (Government of Myanmar 2016, 238).

Private Education and Tutoring

Myanmar at present also has a burgeoning private education taking shape. While private schooling was not officially sanctioned by the state, the number of supplementary or shadow education providers in the primary and secondary sector nonetheless grew tremendously in recent decades. Since the passing of the new Private Schools Law in late 2011, the path has opened for new private schools to officially register, expanding and legitimising the private education sector. They are responding to the highly competitive and assessment driven culture of the compulsory schooling sector, and the desire of middle and upper-class families to provide their children with a competitive advantage, including preparation for overseas study. It is also a response to what Lall (2008, 128) puts forward as, "a state that no longer provides the minimum education needed by its citizens."

Likewise, attending private tutoring outside school, has become commonplace amongst the middle class, particularly in urban centres. Often children will attend primary school in the morning, and then attend these extra tuition classes in the afternoon/evening. Anecdotally, the woeful underpayment for teachers' wages through the state payroll, has led many teachers to offering up their services to teach these classes, often at the expense of their regular waged employment in state schools. Recognizing the importance of these extra education classes to children's academic success, a number of NGOs and university students have established and operated low or no-cost schools for children from poor backgrounds. The problem with many of these operations, however, is that they are staffed by under/unqualified people and run with large class sizes—defeating the purposes for which they were set up (Lorch 2008).

Current Issues in Myanmar's Education System: Access, Quality and Equity

It is important to note that the statistics presented in the below section are often seen as contentious and problematic, as they often do not capture the full story of the situation in the country. This is largely due to the inability of census processes to enter into conflict-affected and border regions of the country without it being seen as a tool of political manipulation (TNI 2014).

Early Childhood Care and Education

Across the education spectrum, access indicators in Myanmar remain poor. While participation rates in formal ECCE have improved dramatically in the span of 10 years, the majority of children aged 3–5 do not have access to such opportunities. UNICEF (2012) illustrate in its *Situational Analysis on Children* that access to ECCE is strongly related to wealth and region. Allowing for regional variations, typically children living in poverty and more remote/ethnic minority dominated or conflict-affected regions were those least likely to be accessing ECC services (Government of Myanmar 2016). Historically, the government has not invested significant sums in ECCE, particularly outside the central lowlands. Interesting about ECCE is that the Ministry of Social Welfare, rather than the Ministry of Education, has held responsibility for the development of the sector. This has allowed community-based organizations, NGOs and INGOs to establish informal programs throughout the country and served to make the state a smaller actor in service provision in this sector (UNICEF 2012). In the past couple years, however, the government has signalled its intent to invest much more of its resources in ECCD, with a clear commitment to increase children's access to quality early childhood education

services for those most disadvantaged. Passage of a ECCD Policy in 2014, and the clear prioritisation of equitable provision with the NESP are signals that there is (at least discursive) commitment to filling this gap, particularly for non-urban and remote areas of the countries.

EFA Progress

Myanmar, as a signatory to the MDGs and EFA, has made some progress towards the education focused MDGs on Universal Primary Education (UPE) and gender equality. In recent years, the national government under a series of national plans has focused on increasing enrolment rates, and improving rates of primary school completion (UNESCO 2007, 2014). Quantitatively, improvements have been demonstrated in that greater numbers (84%) of primary aged children were attending school in 2010 (UNICEF 2012), compared to a UNICEF report from a decade earlier noting that more than 40% of children in the country had never set foot in school (cited in Lwin 2000). At that time, a significant issue noted was a lack of schools, where one school was noted to be serving between 5 and 25 villages, depending on the region of the country, with border areas having minimal access to schools (Khin Maung Kyi et al. 2000, cited in: Lall 2008). The past decade has seen a significant amount of school construction and the implementation of multi-grade classrooms in areas where teacher shortages and/or classroom space shortages have been acute. That stated, there remain considerable disparities in terms of net primary attendance rates across the country.[7] The 2014 EFA additionally indicates gender parity for students at primary and secondary levels, with some regional variations where girls' enrolment is slightly lower in Rakhine state. However, given the difficulty of obtaining reliable data for many areas, these figures may not reflect experiences at a more localized level, further discussed below.

Access

Many access related issues are most acute amongst populations who are marginalized in contemporary society—those from minority ethnic groups, those who live in remote or border areas of the country, are from a lower socio-economic background, are refugees/IDPs, or are living under the threat or consequence of conflict and/or natural disaster. For example, in conflict-affected or ceasefire areas of Kayin

[7] According to the 2014 census, 35.72% of children aged 5–17 do not attend school, amounting to 4.5 million children. While recognizing the data might be incomplete and not portray a full picture, the census data illustrates how, possibly, there remain considerable disparities across the country with Shan showing the lowest school attendance rate at 57.4% and Chin (78.5%), Kachin (75.2%) and Kaya (72.58%) the highest (2014 Census).

(Karen), Kayah (Karenni), Shan, and Rakhine (Arakan) States, only one out of ten children were able to attend primary school in 2005 (Watchlist 2009). In these regions, forms of direct and indirect violence, including the destruction or occupation of schools by military forces, the planting of landmines on access routes to schools, and the intimidation and/or harassment by military forces of teachers and students all preclude ongoing participation of children in schooling (GCPEA 2014).

Girls' Access to Schooling

Nationally, gender equity targets in primary education have been met in terms of enrolment, but it is unclear to what extent inequities exist at a local level. A general trend in Myanmar is for more girls than boys to be enrolled in schools, particularly in the east, with this disparity growing even further into secondary education. However, a disaggregated analysis by township has not occurred and is necessary for a full picture of gender related issues in schooling (UNICEF 2012). For example, there is some suggestion that for poor households in particular, families will make economic-based decisions on which of their children to send to school, a process that often disadvantages girls (Watchlist 2009). Additionally, as Maber (2014) suggests, the qualitative experiences of children in schools, due to approaches to discipline and instruction, may also create particular forms of disengagement from schooling. Some women have reported that monastic schools in their area (Shan State) would only accept boys, so while their brothers received an education there was no accessible school for them to attend. The high incidence of sexual assault by the *Tatmadaw* and the risks associated with travel in zones of active fighting also contribute to preventing many girls from accessing schooling (WLB 2014). Likewise, while girls may be officially enrolled in a school, their household, caring and farming responsibilities often result in sporadic attendance. At tertiary level, higher numbers of women are typically enrolled than men, however, access to courses is highly gendered, as also highlighted below. Rather than being an indication of women's opportunities in society such statistics belie the devaluing of tertiary education as not providing a route to employment that attracts status and financial reward (Maber 2014).

Secondary School Attendance

Considering that almost half of the students entering primary school do not make it until the end, it is no surprise that participation rates in secondary schooling remain low. While 95.3% of those children who do successfully complete the last year of primary transition to lower secondary, gross enrolment rates for secondary school stand at approximately 53% (UNICEF 2012). This is largely due to the high rates of attrition in basic education, with the majority of children failing to reach the last

year of their primary schooling. Regional and socio-economic differences are more pronounced at secondary level than they are at primary. For example, only 28.2% of children from the poorest households were in secondary school, compared with 85.5% from the richest households; secondary school attendance rate was 74.7% in Yangon but only 30.9% in Rakhine (UNICEF 2012). Reasons for dropout are varied, and include: economic factors (i.e. direct and opportunity costs), a perceived lack of educational quality/relevance, the ongoing impacts of conflict/natural disasters, and access-related issues such as distance to the nearest school (Lall 2008; Lwin 2000; UNICEF 2012; MoE 2013).

Higher Education's 'Exclusive' Expansion

In recent years, tertiary education has undergone mass expansion. The number of higher education institutions has gone from 32 in 1988 to 156 in 2008. Today every state and division has a minimum of three tertiary institutions to cater to its needs (Lall 2008). Given the issues around access at lower levels of schooling, however, pathways into tertiary education remain limited to those who 'survive' through to the Standard X examination, and successfully pass it. Corruption and nepotism into popular courses and universities remain an issue, and stand as a barrier to candidates who score well on the examination, but lack appropriate connections (Lwin 2007).[8] Additionally, tertiary learning is significantly gendered, despite high numbers of female students. For a number of university courses, including medicine, women are required to have a higher grade than men to qualify for admission, and in some institutions courses such as geology admit only male students (Maber 2014). Furthermore, the politicization of higher education, and in particular the scrutiny given to students and staff within it, offers them very little space for dissent and manoeuvre. The government frequently targets leadership of student unions and academic staff, and arrests and/or dismissals are a common occurrence (GCPEA 2014).

Within higher education, quality of instruction remains varied, but is generally deemed to be of poor quality (Lwin 2007). A key issue at present within the sector is that due to a multitude of government ministries who manage and oversee higher education institutions, patterns of funding and quality assurance vary greatly. Additionally, subject courses at present are poorly aligned with current and future employment opportunities in the country, and many graduates lack appropriate skills for entry into the labour market (MoE 2013).

Declining quality in higher education has also led to a burgeoning demand for students seeking alternatives for tertiary studies outside the country. To meet this

[8] Additionally, access to scholarships for local or international study, through newly introduced government scholarships, though academic institutions or through International and regional NGOs require students to have a certain level of academic preparation that is still beyond the reach of many.

demand, institutions have been set up to prepare students for the entry requirements of foreign universities (particularly in English), assist with Visa applications, and support their move over to the foreign university. There has been little regulation of these providers, and it has catered primarily to the urban elite of Yangon who have the resources and ability to send their children to such places. Lwin (2000, 15) notes, that the growth of this private shadow education system, "brings about unnecessary inequality of opportunity for pupils, resulting from differences in family means and geographical background."

Outside of issues of quality and access to higher education, are also issues over control of the sector. A significant source of contention in the reform process of recent years has been over the degree of control that the state should have over university governance and decision-making. As Chap. 5 specifies in more detail, through a process of negotiation, and amendments to the initially passed National Education Law, there is now some scope for universities to govern their own affairs. The challenge, however, as the NESP signals, is finding that balance between autonomy and state oversight. Using an equity-based argument, the government contends that, "If too much autonomy is given to HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] then it may be difficult for the government to insist that HEI's take special measures to provide access…to students from disadvantaged backgrounds…[and] ensure policy directives are implemented…too much central oversight…can be just as damaging in terms of impeding change." (Government of Myanmar 2016, 192).

Funding and (Under)Investments

In relation to issues of **redistribution**, a key issue alluded to at the outset of this section is the lack of appropriate resourcing to education in the country. In 2012, the government spent approximately 0.7% of its GDP on education (World Bank 2015, as cited in Government of Myanmar 2016), well below the average for countries in the region. As a percentage of the overall budget, Myanmar also spends very little on education—ranging between 4% and 7.5% depending on the year and estimates used (MoE 2013). Since 2012, as a result of reforms, public spending on education has been increasing, however, this remains the lowest level of investment in the ASEAN region, where ASEAN and developing Asian countries invest around 12% of public expenditure in education or on average 4% of GDP (World Bank 2015, as cited in Government of Myanmar 2016). The longstanding lack of sufficient funding provides little opportunity for the Ministry of Education to make significant headway in reforming an education system that is seen by many to be fundamentally broken.

The underfunding of education has led to a lack of sufficient educational facilities in many locales, with ramifications for the teaching and learning process. Overcrowding in classrooms is common. While nationally student to teacher ratios are suggested as being 34:1 (MoE 2013), this masks the disparities in class sizes that exist in rural/remote settings where up to 100 students in a single classroom may be

a normal occurrence. Conversely, in remote areas class sizes may be very small, resulting in multiple grades being taught together with one teacher. Additionally, while the government has managed to get more students into school using existing infrastructure through such multi-grade classrooms, teachers remain poorly equipped to manage instruction in such settings. Teacher shortages in remote or conflict-affected areas as well as adequate preparation for low-resource settings remain under-addressed.

Since the start of the reform process in 2011, however, there have been substantial increases of almost 250% in the government's budget for education. This has led to a reduction in the household spending on education, as the government bears more of the cost (from 60% household/30% government in 2019–2010, to the opposite by 2013–2014). Despite these increases there is recognition that if the government would like to achieve the transformations it specifies in terms of improving access, quality and equity in the education system, it will need to substantially increase its financing to education on an annual basis somewhere between 10% and 20%, to result in the education budget by 2021 equating to about 2.3–3% of total GDP (Government of Myanmar 2016, 240).

Cost of Education

Since 2007, the government has made a commitment to providing free primary education to all children, yet reports suggest that due to the chronic under-resourcing of the education sector, many families are still required to pay fees or purchase texts/uniforms as a precondition for sending their children to school (Watchlist 2009). According to a UNICEF report (2012, 86), these costs preclude up to 30% of children from attending school. Ethnic parallel education systems receive very little or no funding external and consequently the costs of these schools, including teacher stipends, are largely born by the communities they serve (WPRC and HURFOM 2015). Inequalities in teacher salaries across the different education sectors have also been a point of grievance, with ethnic education providers questioning why government sector teachers are paid higher salaries in their regions compared to local teachers (Saw Law Eh Moo in Michaels 2014).

Curriculum

Although now in the process of reform, current national state curriculum remains rigid, subject/content driven, inflexible to adaptation to different contexts and backgrounds, and devoid of a developmental approach (UNICEF 2012; MoE 2013; Gray 2014). Content has pushed a singular national identity through the dominance of Bamar cultural and military history (explored further in Chap. 3) as well as the association of national with religious identity. Under the banner of developing

moral character amongst the student population, Buddhist cultural courses and rituals have increased in schools since the late 1990s along with content in textbooks. By contrast, references to other religions have been entirely omitted from schoolbooks (Cheesman 2003, 57). The current curricula, teachers' guides and resource books have not been assessed in terms of quality of content, gender sensitivities, age and developmental appropriateness (UNICEF 2012; Sugiyama 2013). A specific concern has been the utilization of textbooks (specifically history texts) as a mechanism of legitimating the military regime through an anti-colonial, nationalistic discourse (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012). Such narratives work to establish a process of 'othering' which establishes a clear set of protagonist and antagonists actors in contemporary national narrative.

The In-/Exclusion of Languages in Education

A key tension in past and present reform efforts has centred around language of instruction, to which we now pay more focused attention. Traditionally, the state has seen the promotion of the Burmese language as central to the promotion of national unity. This holds truth despite the incoherence and contradictions in language policy, linked to attitudes to the use of English amongst elites, which are underpinned by a legacy of colonialism. For instance, Burmese is supposed to be the official language, but there is still a lot of government paperwork that is only in English, including passports. Moreover, the insistence on conducting certain areas of life in English (medicine, technology, law), in addition to much teaching at the tertiary level, also suggests that there is a historically rooted attachment to English, coexisting with the aspiration to make Burmese the dominant national language.

However, despite such inconsistence, there was a backlash from ethnic actors who felt that the promotion of Burmese was done at the expense of recognition of other languages and cultures. It is important to note that until the 1962 coup, some scope was afforded for the teaching and/or utilisation of ethnic language in state education. Typically, this involved the teaching of ethnic language and/or literature until the 2nd standard as a separate subject. After the junta, however, ethnic languages and ethnic literature was banished from state education (Nyein (Shalom) Foundation 2012). Since 2011 there has been a reawakening of discussion around the role of languages other than Burmese in classrooms.

One of the key areas of focus for the government's current reform process, for example, has been around language(s) of instruction. The rapid assessment of the basic education sector, done at the start of Phase One, clearly identified that the language policy needed to be changed due to a number of concerns. One is that the Child Law of 1993 specifies that, "*every child shall have the right to maintain his or her own cherished language*." In effect, this right has been violated, given that since 1988 use of languages other than Burmese was not permitted in state education. Additionally, the report notes that the language barrier is perceived as a significant cause for drop out from non-Burmese contexts. The report concludes that while the

policy environment until the time of the CESR has "*constrained development of expertise in bilingual language and learning issues, as well as in educationally sound strategies for addressing the range of bi- and multilingual contexts that exist in Myanmar*" (MoE 34). At the same time, there existed opportunities within the reform process to develop a clear language policy that was more inclusive and equitable and better acknowledged the range of bi- and multilingual contexts that exists in Myanmar.

UNICEF, as part of its PBEA activities in Myanmar has supported a process of facilitated dialogues around the topic. The aim according to a report was to "*canvas policy alternatives for issues already being debated and which are the cause of conflict, tension or policy paralysis*", specifically "*alternatives to the mandated use of Myanmar as exclusive medium of instruction in state schools*" (UNICEF 2016, 6–7). Those involved in these dialogues noted the power of bringing different stakeholders with starkly different interests into the same space to talk about a deeply political and difficult issue. Over time, the idea was to clear up misconceptions about what was 'allowed' or 'appropriate' in terms of language teaching, based on bringing together representatives from the state along with the ethnic actors. This opening up of a space for conversation between individuals and groups who for decades had not sat in the same room was also seen to create opportunities for policy change in regards to the teaching of ethnic languages in Mon State.

Other actors have embarked in advocacy efforts aimed at changing perceptions that learning in a language other than Burmese is to the detriment of a child's schooling success. For example, the Nyein (Shalom) Foundation (2012) produced a report based on interviews and reading assessment data of over 600 ethnic minority children and their families from Kachin, Karen, Mon, Chin, Rakhine, and Shan states. The study found that many learners understand little in school because of the language of instruction being Burmese. This then effects their performance on measures such as average reading time for a passage, word recognition and retell, where ethnic minority children perform significantly worse than native Burmese speakers. The study concludes that the current paradigm of Burmese as the sole language of instruction puts non-native speakers at a significant disadvantage in terms of success in schooling, and puts them on the path to dropping out of school. It recommends a policy for ethnic languages to be used as much as possible in primary schools, reflecting the conclusions of educational research more broadly.

The 2014 Education Law recognises the role of languages other than Burmese in the classroom, but does so in a limited way. It states, "*If necessary, things can be explained orally in children's mother tongue*" (MoE 2014, 5). It also states how ethnic languages can be taught as a subject. This directive is a direct rebuff to attempts by many in civil society to see the dominant ethnic language of a particular school/classroom be the primary language of instruction. This stands in contrast to the governments' main conviction that Burmese is still an important unifying factor for the country, and potentially even more so in a move towards federalism. Such forms of implicit resistance to practical change are evident in very partial or even insufficient approaches to the implementation of substantive textbook and curricula reform. Despite the aspiration to include 20% "local content" and provide textbooks and teacher manuals as mentioned above, there are real dangers that their potential

to address ethnic grievances and frustrations will be thwarted given inaction due to major systemic implementation challenges.

Thus, despite the advocacy efforts to date, the promise of a state education system that acknowledges and embraces diversity, and affords opportunities for multilingualism remains unmet. This has consequences not only for social cohesion, but also the degree to which this education system can be inclusive and equitable to all. As a report by Lo Bianco suggests:

> Significant challenges remain for minority languages and new methods and practices of language planning are urgently required to foster national unity – methods which go far beyond 'consultation' as a modality of seeking endorsement or compliance of populations. There has been serious disparity between the perceptions of minority groups and officials as to the aims and experience of language education. (Lo Bianco 2015, 35)

Student protests that followed passage of the Education Law in September 2014 were in part the product of a sentiment that demands by NNER, ethnic education authorities, and other elements of civil society for acknowledgement of children's rights to learn in their mother tongue being unmet under the legislation drafted. In February 2015, the government agreed to reconsider the law through several amendments. One proposed amendment would have granted "*the right to use concerned ethnic languages as a medium of instruction beginning with early childhood*", but was voted down by lawmakers 394 to 98. A more progressive proposal by the NNER for "*mother tongue-based multilingual education*" never made it into either house's amendment bill (Snaing 2015).

In summary on the challenges of inclusive language approaches in education, the lack of acknowledgement and support for mother-tongue instruction remains a key grievance. Lo Bianco (2013, 27) notes the importance of language in the region as a "marker of ethnic identity and a mediator of cultural, symbolic and material resources." In the case of Myanmar, Bianco points out that "language and ethnicity have been central to violent conflicts, which have arisen in response to the attempted creation of a singular Myanmar identity by a centralised military government" (Lo Bianco 2015, 12). This has underpinned the promotion of Burmese language to the exclusion of other languages. Little policy space has previously been given thus far to addressing the multilingual educational context of Myanmar and the "language-barrier" because of this, and the language of instruction continues to be a significant reason for drop out and demand for education from non-state educational providers (UNICEF 2012, 86–87). The lack of educational resources and opportunities in the local language is perceived as a frustration and unfair treatment of those who speak minority languages, while conversely the reinforcement of local languages through various forms of education can support lessening such frustrations.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, Myanmar's education system at present is plagued by a number of challenges that are the product of its historical evolution, decades of armed conflict, chronic underfunding, and a system that is highly fragmented and

de-facto decentralized. This has led to a situation today where there remain significant concerns about unequal access, poor educational quality, and the rising rates of inequality that are the result of these conditions. This, it is argued, has been a key source of discontent and grievance for many in Myanmar and either perpetuated or fuelled conflict over time.

At the same time, the past few years have seen a political commitment to redress some of these issues through a significant reform of the education system. This reform process, described in more detail in Chap. 5, has led to passage of a new National Education Law and a new strategic plan which sets an ambitious vision for the coming few years. The chapter has highlighted some of the possibilities *and* challenges that need to be addressed when moving from policy rhetoric into transformations of education practices and outcomes. Hence, while this chapter presents a picture of careful optimism about the *possibilities* for recent changes to redress long-standing inequities and grievances—particularly in regards to concerns around inequitable **distribution** of educational opportunities and outcomes, a lack of **recognition** for the particular concerns and issues facing minority-group learners, insufficient **representation** or recognized autonomy to local actors to provision for and manage education—there remain serious questions about how well this can contribute to a broader process of **reconciliation** against the context of conflicting demands on education, a complex system of parallel forms of education provision and hence varying mandates for education.

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