

What Should Be the Policy on Education in Democratic Burma/Myanmar? Discussion Paper on Educational Reform

Thein Lwin, Ed.D (12 April 2012)

Abstract

This paper discusses thirteen areas for promoting educational reform and strengthening national identities through a decentralized education system within the context of a democratic transition in a multi-ethnic society. It discusses the concept of a broad and balanced curriculum which ensures equal opportunity to all students, and provides the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to become independent life-long learners. It suggests a learning-centered approach with assessment focused on supporting learning. It also considers vocational education as work-related learning to meet the demands of national economic development. Reform of higher education and teacher education are also discussed.

Introduction

Some positive changes have been evident in Burma since March 2011. Political prisoners, including student and ethnic leaders, have been released. The National League for Democracy has been able to re-register, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her colleagues have won 43 seats out of 45 in the by-election on the 1st April 2012. There are clear indications that the media is, indeed, opening up. The United States, United Kingdom, Thailand and some other countries have endorsed the reform process with visits from high-ranking government officials.

However, there is little progress in education. A proposal for an educational survey was rejected in Parliament by the Minister for Education. The Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008), approved by the Parliament, does not give consideration to decentralization of power and the role of ethnic minority groups in the implementation of education. Moreover, the Minister for Education has stated in a speech made in Naypyiday in March 2012 that he will continue to implement the 30-year Education Project (2001-2030). This 30-year project was instigated by the military regime and now needs reform appropriate to an emerging democracy.

The paper considers the following areas for open discussion in order to promote educational reform in Burma:

1. Education and the Constitution
2. Universal Compulsory Education
3. Education for Sustainable Development
4. A Decentralized Education System
5. Languages, Identities and Education
6. A Broad and Balanced Curriculum
7. Learning-Centered Education
8. Assessment for Learning and Assessment for Selection
9. Non-Formal Education / Learning Community
10. Private Education
11. Vocational Education
12. Higher Education
13. Teacher Education

1. Education and the Constitution

In the Chapter “Citizen, Fundamental Rights and Duties of the Citizens” of the “Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008)”, Section 366 states that,

“Every citizen, in accord with the educational policy laid down by the Union: (a) has the right to education; (b) shall be given basic education which the Union prescribes by law as compulsory; (c) have the right to conduct scientific research explore science, work with creativity and write to develop the arts and conduct research freely other branches of culture.”

It is encouraging that the constitution guarantees educational rights. However, in the Chapter of “Basic Principles of the Union”, Section 28, paragraph (c) states that,

“The Union shall implement free, compulsory primary education system.”

Primary education in the Burmese education system is for children up to the Fourth Standard, that is, children aged nine years. The age for completion of minimum compulsory education internationally is fourteen years. The paper recommends that the minimum school leaving age in Burma should be fourteen.

Besides, Section 28, paragraph (d) states that

“The Union shall implement modern education systems that will promote all-around correct thinking and a good moral character contributing towards the building of the Nation.”

In this paragraph, the meaning of “all-around correct thinking” is not clear. In this pluralist world, a single set of thoughts, principles or beliefs should not be considered as “correct”. Burma is an emerging democracy, and it should encourage independent thinking.

In the Basic Principles of the Union, Section 22, paragraph (a) states that,

“The Union shall assist to develop language, literature, fine arts and culture of the National races”.

This is encouraging for the development of indigenous national languages. It means that the ethnic nationality groups develop their language, literature, fine art and culture independently and the government will assist them. However, Section 450 of General Provisions of the Constitution states that the *Burmese*¹ language is the official language. The Constitution does not recognize the indigenous national languages as official languages in their states or regions. This does not help sustain or encourage the development of ethnic minority languages and cultures.

A positive endorsement is stated in the Section 366, paragraph (c) that “every citizen has the right to conduct scientific research, explore science, work with creativity and write to develop the arts and conduct research freely in other branches of culture.” In addition, this paper would like to suggest ensuring academic freedom.

¹ In the constitution the term ‘Myanmar’ is used rather than Burmese.

2. Universal Compulsory Education

Compulsory education varies in different countries. For example, the compulsory education age in India is six to fourteen according to the Indian education policy of 2009. In England, the minimum school enrolment age is from four and half to five and half years old; the school leaving age is currently sixteen, which will be seventeen in 2013 and eighteen in 2017. In the USA, it varies from State to State; the minimum school enrolment age is from five to eight, and school leaving age is from sixteen to eighteen. In some States, however, fourteen year olds can leave school at their parent's request.

Education for All (compulsory education) is a global movement led by UNESCO. It was initiated in 1990 at the Jomtien Conference in Thailand. Reviewed in 2000 at Dhaka in Bangladesh, compulsory education was found not to have been successfully implemented in many countries. Burma is one of those which does not meet universal compulsory education targets.

The participants at the Dhaka Conference agreed on the Dhaka Framework for Action which re-affirmed their commitment to achieving Education for All, and identified six key measurable education goals which aim to meet the learning needs of all children, young people and adults by 2015. These education goals are:

1. Expand early childhood care and education
2. Provide free and compulsory primary education for all
3. Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults
4. Increase adult literacy by 50 per cent
5. Achieve gender equality
6. Improve the quality of education

The present government is trying to provide free and compulsory primary education in Burma. It also needs to promote learning and life skills, adult literacy and quality education. Both girls and boys have equal rights to education in Burma. However, in many cases where parents of low income have to make choices about what education they can afford, boys always get priority and girls have to leave school early. Consideration should be made for girls' education in such circumstances.

3. Education for Sustainable Development

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a UNESCO vision stating that every person should benefit from an education that is environmentally sound, socially equitable, culturally sensitive and economically just. Moreover, every person should benefit from genuine learning opportunities throughout life, within the community and in the workplace. UNESCO suggests that the following topics should be included in the school curriculum:

1. Biodiversity
2. Climate Change
3. Cultural Diversity
4. Indigenous Knowledge

5. Disaster Risk Reduction
6. Poverty Reduction
7. Gender Equality
8. Health Promotion
9. Sustainable Lifestyles
10. Peace and Human Security
11. Water
12. Sustainable Urbanization

Inclusion of these topics should be considered when we develop our curriculum.

4. A Decentralized Education System

A system of decentralized education should be instituted in Burma, which is a geographically, as well as an ethnically, diverse nation. Decentralization of education can guarantee the rights for ethnic nationality states to run their own schools, allowing each state enough room to create a curriculum incorporating their priorities and values. This paper suggests that:

- Every state and region has freedom to develop education in their respective states and regions;
- Each state and region should be responsible for creating their own curriculum following an agreed national minimum standard;
- Both Central/Federal Government and individual State Governments should have responsibility for the education budget;
- Within the state and region, each school should be administered by a school governing body; and
- Each State Government's education authority should oversee the development and operation of schools and provide support to ensure the quality of education.

5. Languages, Identities and Education

What should be the policy for language education in Burma? This paper suggests that there is a need to take into consideration 'multilingual education' in the light of the linguistic diversity that exists in Burma. It sees linguistic diversity as a positive characteristic of the country, and safeguarding this diversity as an important task for its citizens. The term 'multilingual education' was adopted by UNESCO in 1999 to refer to the use of at least three languages: the mother tongue, the national language and an international language in education.

The major ethnic nationality languages such as Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhaing and Shan should be official languages in their respective states. This should also be endorsed in a constitutional amendment. Some other countries have chosen more than one official language: for example, India has 19 official languages and South Africa has 11. An official language is ultimately imposed in administration, education and other formal domains in a state. The potential for practical use of an ethnic nationality language is a major factor in assisting to promote language and culture.

[For more information and details about language and education, see, “Languages, Identities and Education” Dr. Thein Lwin (2011).]²

6. A Broad and Balanced Curriculum

Scholars suggest that there are different theoretical orientations to curriculum considerations such as the intellectual tradition, the social-behaviorist tradition, the experientialist tradition, and the critical-reconstructionist tradition. However, the curriculum development task before us is to draw upon all curriculum traditions for insights and values that provide the best fit in our situation, including serving the interests of students and meeting the needs of society. This paper subscribes to the following principles:

- All students must be provided with equal educational opportunities;
- A broad and balanced curriculum will enable all students to develop knowledge, skills and competencies needed for adult and working life;
- Students must become independent, life-long learners;
- Learning is more effective when students see the connections and relationships between people, ideas, events and processes, as in real life situations;
- Learning involves developing values as well as knowledge and skills;
- Students need to understand and respect diversity, value equity, and develop a sense of social responsibility in order to play a meaningful role in society.

In general, eight areas of learning are included in a school curriculum. They are:

1. Languages
2. Mathematics
3. Sciences
4. Social Studies
5. Citizenship Education
6. Agriculture, Design and Technology, and Information & Communication Technology (ICT)
7. Music and Arts
8. Physical and Health Education

7. Learning-Centered Education

Two concepts of teaching and learning – teacher-centred and child-centred – have determined policy and practice in the international context for the past 150 years, and continue to fuel educational debate. NGOs operating in Burma introduced the Child-Centred Approach (CCA), while the official Government position assumed a didactic approach with teachers delivering prescribed texts to students who played a predominantly passive role. Consequently, teachers are left confused and engage in a poorly understood mix of the two methods with little deep understanding of the teaching-learning process. There needs to be a fundamental shift in emphasis with real learning and authentic assessment replacing rote learning and excessive reliance on a flawed

² http://www.shanland.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4264:languages-identities-and-education-in-relation-to-burmamyanmar&catid=115:opinions&Itemid=308 (12 April 2012)

examination system. There must also be a balance between the individual student's interest and curriculum needs. This paper suggests a learning-centered approach which guarantees a role for the teacher to provide guidance and enables students to become independent life-long learners.

School should create a learning environment that encourages students to become active learners and critical thinkers. Students should be encouraged to express their own views, and there should be no right and wrong answer when offering opinion. Any expression should employ not only logic but also broad intellectual criteria such as clarity, credibility, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, significance and fairness.

We are facing challenges every day as to what to accept and what to deny in this changing world where we meet people from different social, cultural and political backgrounds and who may hold different values. A proper judgment can be made by considering all factors and thinking critically for ourselves. Such a kind of learning-centered approach should be encouraged.

8. Assessment for Learning and Assessment for Selection

One of the factors that undermines education in Burma is the examination system. Pass-fail examinations, selection of science and art routes by 8th standard, and university entrance by 10th standard examination marks affect students' autonomy, competence and attitudes to learning. Among teachers, students and their parents, education has become excessively examination-oriented and, as a consequence, schools have ceased to be centers of learning as exam-focused tuition and corruption have become rife.

As part of education reform in Burma, the examination system should also be changed in favor of a formative assessment system that encourages continuous assessment for learning. Students should be awarded levels of qualification at the end of schooling, rather than a simple pass or fail. A more detailed discussion of assessment will be presented in a separate paper.

University entrance should be based on student's aptitude and ability rather than 10th standard examination marks. Students should have to meet the requirements of the university course that they wish to study. Universities may hold entrance exams which must be free from corruption.

There is a Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) that is a worldwide evaluation in OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) member countries (currently there are 65 member countries) of 15 year old students' academic performance. The PISA was performed first in 2000 and repeated every three years. The aim of the PISA is to view its member countries' educational policies and outcomes. In 2009, the students from Shanghai, China were at the top for all Maths, Science and Reading assessments. In 2000, 2003 and 2006 the students from Finland were at the top. Using the example of PISA, we may investigate using a similar monitoring program in our states and regions.

9. Non-Formal Education / Learning Community

Non-formal, compensatory education is needed for those who have never attended school, and for those who dropped out from school before completion of their basic education. This is intended to

help them to continue their education and prepare them for vocational or other training. Since the Burmese education system does not link with the world of work, there are many young graduates who cannot find a proper job and are becoming unemployed. They too will need training or further study to upgrade their skills and competencies. Additionally, people in the workplace also need to acquire new knowledge in this rapidly changing world. Life-long learning has to be encouraged as it is in other developing and developed countries.

Adult learning centers should be setup in every region of Burma. If a learning center can be attached to existing schools, colleges and universities, costs can be reduced. Any suitably experienced people in the region could contribute their knowledge and experience at the learning center. If we can create a learning community where people can learn new knowledge and contribute their experiences, we can begin to build Burma as a learning society.

10. Private Education/School

All private schools were nationalized after the military coup in 1962. After years of neglect in education and too much emphasis on the exam system, education has been weak in public schools. As a consequence, many students rely on illegal tuition and boarding schools. In December 2011 the government imposed a private school registration act, which appears to legitimize the former illegal tuition and boarding schools. Additionally, the act prohibits the discussion of political and religious issues at school.

The paper suggests that government sponsored public schools should provide guaranteed quality education. However, public schools are designed to meet majority needs and may not suit some minority groups, such as language and cultural groups. Such minority groups should be allowed to set up private schools which practice their own group value system. The paper strongly recommends that education should not be used for business profit.

A private school should make a clear statement of its aims and objectives. Students and their parents should have a right to choose a school which has the same vision as they have. Where a private school is based on religious values, broader religious study should not be prohibited. Schools in a democracy should link with the real world outside of the school, and students should be encouraged to discuss social, political and economic issues around them.

11. Vocational Education

Vocational education should be developed in line with economic development in Burma. Compulsory education until the age of fourteen should be followed by a vocational education route running parallel with the academic route after this age, with students being taught both vocational skills and theoretical knowledge. This will permit a student who has chosen a vocational route to have a chance of joining higher education in the future.

With the aim of promoting rural development, community colleges should be set up in every region of Burma offering vocational training relating to the local economy and resources. Community colleges would also provide adult-education. Vocational education should be operated in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, business interests, economists and other experts.

12. Higher Education

Higher education should be reformed in many areas including, most importantly, university structure and administration, students' entrance procedures, teaching and learning strategies, scientific research, and communication with world universities. Currently universities and academic institutions are organized in disparate disciplines: medical, technical, agricultural, educational, economic, etc. under the different ministerial administrations. A university should cover a range of disciplines in order to encourage students who study in different subject areas and who will serve the country in different sectors to meet at university, make friends, exchange ideas and share views.

Universities should not be under centralized control but should have autonomy under the supervision of a university council for each university. The Ministry of Education's role should be to ensure quality and provide financial support. Currently, the structure of a university has all the appearance of an army with the rector looking like an army general commanding colonels, majors and captains. University posts should be occupied by those with appropriate academic and administrative abilities.

University entrance should be based on student's aptitude, interest and ability to study a particular subject, not on 10th Standard examination marks. Applicants should complete their basic education and sit a university entrance examination, or meet other entrance requirements set by the university. Higher education teaching should be research-based rather than restricted to single textbook instruction. Academic freedom should be guaranteed and universities and faculties should be free to exchange ideas and knowledge with other universities, including in those in other countries.

Retired Burmese academic, Dr. Tin Hlaing (Pho Hlaing) has proposed setting up a national university using the examples of the Australian National University and the Singapore National University. A national university is one that can be proud of its national identity and raise the international standing of a university. A successfully established national university would be a model for other universities in the reform process.

13. Teacher Education

To ensure quality education, we have to improve the quality of teaching. Schools today are staffed with un-qualified teachers. However, we pay our respect to these teachers who are serving under difficult circumstances and lack resources and support. If these teachers decide to participate in the education transition, they will be provided with training and support to get higher degrees in education. Newly recruited teachers must possess the required subject-knowledge and gain a teacher education qualification.

Teacher qualification should be through two possible routes: an undergraduate degree course that leads to a B.Ed; or a post-graduate diploma in education. Application for courses and qualification would be by specialty in early childhood, primary, secondary or special educational needs. Teachers should have a chance to continue their studies to M.Ed. Ed.D or Ph.D. Universities would also need

to offer part-time education courses for teachers working in schools. Additionally, school-based in-service teacher training and on-the-job training should be provided.

The paper suggests setting up a system for teacher licensing with a general teaching council or other professional body maintaining a register of well-trained and qualified teachers. Teacher salaries should be comparable with other professions such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc.

Conclusion

The above deliberations are reflections from my work on education for over thirty years with students, teachers, educators and national education groups such as Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan, and are informed by my knowledge and understanding of education in other countries. However, these are my personal opinions and further discussion will need to be informed by research, and the establishment of an education policy body consisting of Members of Parliament, scholars, educators and other interested parties.

The author strongly believes that, with educational reform, Burma has the potential to become a society in which every citizen will benefit from an education that is environmentally sound, socially equitable, culturally sensitive and economically just.

About the Author

Dr. Thein Lwin was a teacher in Burma. He studied education policies and curriculum development at the Center for International Studies in Education (CISE) of University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. He was awarded M.Ed in 1997 and Ed.D in 2001. He is director of the Thinking Classroom Foundation based in Chiang Mai, Thailand which provides teacher training for Burmese teachers and education for Burmese migrants.

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