

Dr. Thein Lwin: **Teach the children well**

A system of “decentralized education” should be instituted in Burma. Since 1962, teachers have not been in a position to determine how they teach children but, rather, have been required by the government to deliver prescribed texts to their students. Education reform should reach the areas of higher education, vocational education, non-formal education and teacher education. And universal, compulsory nine-year education (of children, age 5 to 14) must be launched throughout Burma.

It is often said that schools should focus on child-centered education rather than teacher-centered. However, for decades, the Burmese education system has not encouraged either a teacher-centered or a child-centered approach, rather parroting government-approved readers in preparation for strict examinations. The current system of pass-fail examinations, plus the selection of science and art routes by 8th grade (student age 14) and university entrance by 10th grade (student age 16), affects students’ autonomy, competence, and attitudes to learning. As part of education reform in Burma, the examination system should be changed in favor of a “formative assessment” system that encourages continuous assessment for learning. University entrance should be based on student’s aptitude and ability – rather than 10th grade examination marks. Students should have to meet the requirements of the university course that they wish to study.

Burma is a geographically, as well as an ethnically, diverse nation. Decentralization of education could guarantee a space for ethnic nationality states to run their own schools, allowing each state enough room to create a curriculum incorporating their own priorities and values within a nationally agreed minimum standard. There may be different theoretical orientations to curriculum considerations, but the task before us is to draw upon all curriculum traditions – serving the interests of students and meeting the needs of society.

Multilingual education must be considered based on the linguistic diversity that exists in Burma. This diversity is a positive characteristic of the country, and safeguarding it is an important task for its citizens. The major ethnic nationality languages (Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhaing, and Shan) should be recognized as the official languages in their respective states, with Burmese as the national language. Many other countries have chosen more than one official language: India has 19 official languages; South Africa has 11.

Decentralized education would see universal education to the age of 14 and remove government-prescribed texts for students. The examination system should be revamped to allow for more autonomous study through a process of continuous assessment, rather than pass/fail exams. Decentralized education will also allow ethnic nationality states to run their own schools in their own languages. A “learning-centered approach” is the way forward. This approach guarantees a role for the teacher to provide guidance and enables students to become independent, life-long learners.

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