

Burma Days in Oslo
Oslo, September 24-27, 2000
Norwegian Church Aid / Norwegian Burma Council

The Educational Cost of Army Rule in Burma

Presented by Thein Lwin

Abstract: This paper deals with the educational cost of army rule in Burma in at least four respects. First, there is a lack of access to education due to years of neglect regarding compulsory basic education. Second, the school curriculum fails to promote skills, which are needed for the world of work as well as social life. Third, there is no provision for teaching in languages other than Burmese for children whose mother tongue is not Burmese. The three problems mentioned above are worsened by the fact that the teaching profession is undermined by the regime.

1. Introduction

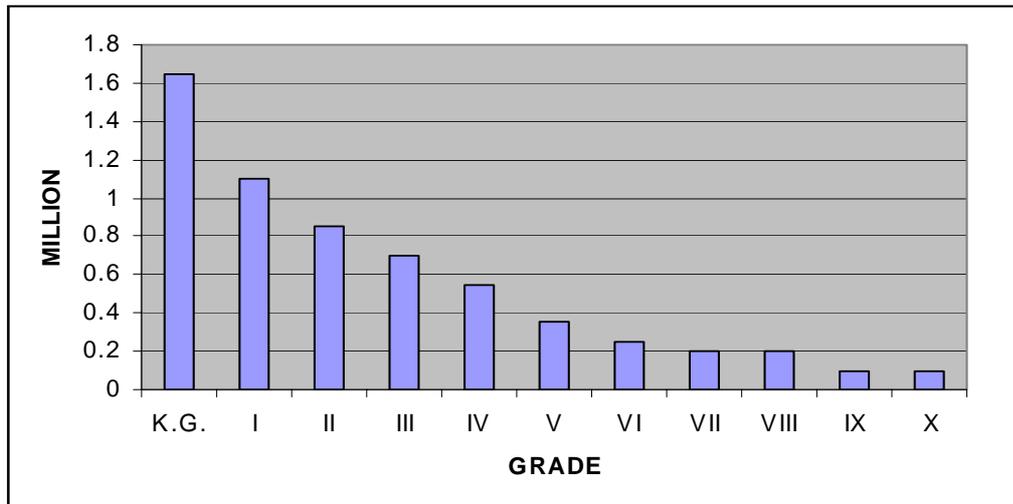
I would like to express my appreciation to the Norwegian Church Aid and the Norwegian Burma Council for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to present this paper entitled 'the educational cost of army rule in Burma'. This paper is, in fact, partly extracted from 'Education in Burma (1945-1999)', a documentary analysis I wrote (Lwin, 1999) and also makes reference to some publications by the Burmese regime as well as other secondary sources. Section 4, 'language rights' is based on my study on the 'teaching of the Mon language', conducted in the ethnic Mon areas in Burma during the academic year 1999-2000. It is hope that this paper will constitute a starting point to promote further discussions on the agenda of education reform in Burma. The paper mainly focuses on basic education and leaves out of consideration higher education.

2. Access to Education

A UNICEF report shows that almost 40 per cent of children never attend school and almost three-quarters fail to complete primary education in Burma (see Khin Maung Kyi *et al*, 2000, p.146). The secondary school enrolment rate is also low and the dropout rate is very high (*ibid.*). As a result, less than 2 per cent of children who enter primary school complete secondary education (*ibid.*). This comes in sharp contrast with the school attendance rate of other countries in the West and the East. For example, England lays down eleven years for compulsory education; Thailand joins Japan in setting 12 years for compulsory education (reported in Bangkok Post, Monday, January 17, 2000, p.2). Figure 1 shows the basic education enrolment during the period 1982 to 1988.

Although the military regime adopted the objectives of the World Declaration on 'Education for All', held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990 (see Inter-Agency Commission, 1990), children's access to education is evidently very limited. Even given the low rates of enrolment, there is a serious shortage of educational facilities, such as the number of schools, the number of teachers and resources like textbooks, libraries and laboratories (Khin Maung Kyi *et al*, 2000, p.146). Figure 2 shows the number of schools, teachers and students in 1995-96 and 1997-98.

Figure 1: Basic Education Enrolment (Average Period 1982-1988)



(Reproduced from Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1992)

Figure 2: Schools, Teachers and Students

	1995/96			1997/98		
	Schools	Teachers	Students	Schools	Teachers	Students
Primary Schools	35762	159078	5337432	35877	167134	5145396
Monastic Primary Schools	1507		83375	1556		93001
Middle Schools	2089	53202	1475081	2091	56955	1545601
High schools	914	16239	385225	923	17089	385270
Teachers' Training Schools	12	316	2067	14	372	3020
Teachers' Training Institutes	5	218	2170	5	281	2321

[Extracted from Union of Myanmar, 1998]

The number of primary schools ranges from one in five villages in the heartland of Burma, to as low as one in twenty five villages in the border regions (see Khin Maung Kyi *et al*, 2000). It is particularly difficult for children in the ethnic nationality areas along the border to attend school, as there is instability due to civil war.

Children drop out of school for any number of reasons. Some are related to the child, his/her family and community environment, and others to the school environment (Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1992). Child related factors include illness, lack of interest, or inability to keep up with the class. Family related factors include lack of motivation on the part of parents to send their children to school, inability of the former to meet school expense, or need for the child to help in earning the family income. Community related factors include poverty, malnutrition and poor health care, as well as low expectations about the value of education, particularly in underdeveloped areas. The school environment factors are related to the lack of availability and the poor quality of all the inputs of the educational process: teacher and teaching methods, curricula, teaching and learning materials, facilities, as well as the organisation and management of the school system (*ibid.*).

The serious plight of children who never enrol in a school or who drop out of school is a high cost of army rule. Child soldiers, child labour and street children are the result of the decades of neglect of compulsory basic education. Nevertheless, thanks

to Buddhist monks, children who never enrolled in schools can still learn the three Rs in monasteries. With regard to 'functional literacy', however, which is required for labour to work efficiently with appropriate skills in agriculture, industry or other sectors (Khin Maung Kyi *et al*, 2000, p.157) children need at least nine years of compulsory education.

The present regime has set a goal of achieving universal access to basic education and completion of primary school by 80 per cent of primary school age children by the year 2000, with assistance from UN agencies (see *ibid.* p.157). However, the government investment in education is very low. According to the official financial figures published in 1999, the Ministry of Education can use only 7.5 per cent of the budget for all ministries while the Ministry of Defence use 40 per cent (see CRPP, 2000). The money allocated to education is only 0.5 per cent of the Gross National Product compared to an average of 2.7 per cent in other Southeast Asian Countries (source: AFP Bangkok August 22, 2000)¹.

In section 3, I will focus on curriculum issues regarding primary and secondary education.

3. Curriculum

In 1964, the military regime launched a 'new system of education'. Basic Education thus became a 5-4-2 system still used nowadays that consisted of:

- primary school (Standard 0 to Standard IV) for children aged 5 to 10;
- middle school (Standard V to Standard VIII) for children aged 10 to 14;
- high school (Standard IX to Standard X) for children aged 15 to 16.

The salient features of the new education system were precedence of science subjects and the use of the Burmese language as the medium of instruction without consideration for indigenous vernacular languages for those children whose mother tongue was not Burmese. In 1998, the Ministry of Education proposed a new curriculum for primary schools in which children are expected to be passive obedient citizens rather than emphasising critical thinking skills. In the academic year 2000-2001, there is a new change for secondary schools in that students have to choose a subject group out of seven groupings. Children were determined by this subject choice system at their early age (i.e. 14) that might shape their adult life. These arguments will be developed in the following sections.

3.1 Primary School Curriculum

From 1964 to 1981 primary schools taught Burmese, mathematics, science, history and geography. From 1981 to 1998, English was taught at the beginning of the primary level and science was removed from this level (see Ministry of Education, 1998, p.2, ch.1). In 1998, the Ministry of Education proposed that primary schools should offer Burmese, English, mathematics, basic science, social studies, aesthetic education, physical education and school activities (see *ibid.* p.10-11, ch.1). This paper, however, highlights the problems found especially in 'social studies': the 'moral and civic' subject aims at producing obedience to rules rather than active participation in society.

¹ The message was sent by "Open School Campaign" <oschool1@chmai2.loxinfo.co.th>

Primary level education is very important in that children need not only achieving mastery of literacy and numeracy skills but also developing social and moral consciousness from an early age. However, The regime uses education as a political tool preventing children from learning how to think². Youngsters are expected to be disciplined in and out of school under the military regime. For example, the Head of State, Senior General Than Shwe gives an official line in education:

In pursuing education, moral, discipline and education are of prime importance. It is also important for students to be desirous of studies and well in discipline. If their discipline is lax, they will be weak in learning and outstanding performance. Only when they possess good discipline, will they be able to serve the interest of the state (see Prospect Burma, 2000).

The notion of 'discipline' invokes ideas of loyalty and the image of obedient citizens.

According to a government report (Union of Myanmar, 1998), a 'pass-fail' examination system has been given up in some primary schools. Instead, the system of grade promotion through continuous assessment is being carried out at 9210 schools out of 40,450 schools. The paper agrees that a pass-fail examination system is not ideal: a pupil who fails an examination early in their childhood might be branded for life as a failure (Office of the SUPDT, 1947) and suffer from a deep-rooted lack of confidence in themselves. The continuous assessment system should be objective in assessing a student's progress throughout a course of study in terms of intellectual, moral, social, physical aptitudes and skills. However, the assessment system bribes students so that they become followers of the regime. For example, if a student is a member of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) formed by the regime, he or she will get 16 marks to pass the yearly examination.

In the following part, the secondary school curriculum issues will be discussed.

3.2 Secondary School Curriculum

Since the new system of education in 1964, junior secondary schools have taught Burmese, English, mathematics, science, history and geography. Physical education and health education are conducted as extra curricula activities. The senior secondary school system has been modified many times under the military regime(s). From 1964 until 1993, examination results at Standard VIII served to segregate young students in the sense that the results determined the subjects that the students would study at senior secondary school. The examination results were placed in two categories - the A-list containing the best results and the B-list with the lower marks. A-list students could choose to study science or arts subjects at senior secondary school but B-list students could study only arts subjects. The result of this segregation was to give precedence to science subjects and downgrade the importance of arts subjects such as history, philosophy, sociology, psychology and so on.

² Graham Bailey of the Free Burma Campaign in South Africa gave this statement on Burma's education system at a press conference in Bangkok after attending the 'education forum' held by the National League for Democracy on Monday 21 August 2000 in Rangoon (Source: AFP, Bangkok, August 22).

In the science stream, the combinations of subjects were Burmese, English, mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology. There were two different combinations in the arts stream. The first combination consisted of Burmese, English, mathematics, economics, history and geography. The second combination was included Burmese, English, optional Burmese, additional English, history and geography. Standard X examination procedure also involved splitting results into an A-list and B-list. A-list students were entitled to apply for a place at university whereas B-list students could only apply to vocational institutes. As a consequence, the adult life of students was substantially determined by examination results taken at a very young age.

In 1993, the system involving a science route and arts route after the Standard VIII examination was suppressed. (It had been previously abolished in 1977, and then reintroduced in 1985). Students now learn both arts and science subjects at Standard IX and X. The subjects are more precisely Burmese, English, mathematics, science (physics, chemistry and biology) and social studies (history, geography and economics). In the academic year 2000-2001, the senior secondary school system is changed to subject grouping. After their Standard VIII examinations, students have to choose one out of seven groupings, which are:

1. Burmese, English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, economics;
2. Burmese, English, mathematics, geography, history, economics;
3. Burmese, English, mathematics, geography, history, optional Burmese;
4. Burmese, English, mathematics, history, economics, optional Burmese;
5. Burmese, English, mathematics, history, physics, chemistry;
6. Burmese, English, mathematics, optional Burmese, physics, chemistry;
7. Burmese, English, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology.

On which grounds will children choose a subject group? There is no tradition of career guidance in Burmese schools. Parents from working class and from rural areas have little knowledge about education and the labour market. If teachers choose a grouping for their pupils, it may not be fair for those children whose academic interests are different from the teachers' choice. Even if the grouping chosen results from a sound dialogue between students, teachers and parents it has to be said that the children are required to make an important decision that will affect their adult life at a very young age.

Another drawback associated with the subject grouping system is that these groupings all concentrate exclusively on preparing students for higher education at the expense of vocational skills. Since less than 10 per cent of secondary school students join higher education, the majority of 90 per cent are not equipped for the world of work. One important problem linked with the present secondary school curriculum is therefore the lack of consideration regarding linking education with working life (Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1992). In particular, the primary and secondary school curricula have narrowly focused on the teaching of facts rather than promoting skills which are needed for the world of work as well as social life.

In the following section, I argue for 'language rights' for those children whose mother tongue is not Burmese. The paper uses as an illustration the data from the study of 'the Teaching of Ethnic Language and the Role of Education in the Context of the Mon Ethnic Nationality in Burma', which I have conducted in the Mon area during the academic year 1999-2000.

4. Language Rights and Assimilation versus Excessive Nationalism in the Case of Ethnic Nationalities

4.1 Language Rights

The language policy applied by the military regime has been to Burmanise at the expense of the language and culture of other indigenous nationalities. In other words, seeks to assimilate in the name of national unity. Since national independence, Burmese has been used as the medium of instruction in all state schools. Before 1962, children in the ethnic nationality areas had a chance to learn their mother tongue as a subject in primary schools. After 1962, the regime did not support the teaching of ethnic languages. In the ethnic Mon area, for example, the regime ordered the Mon subject teachers to step down from their positions. Many teachers had to resign. As a consequence, the Mon language was no longer taught in schools in 1965-1966. But villagers who treasured the Mon language and literature hired at their own expense Mon teachers for their children. It is difficult for Mon language and literature to survive without official recognition by the government. Indeed, a Mon scholar, Nai Pan Hla, recently said that the Mon language is likely to disappear in the next 40 years.

If we consider the primary and/or secondary school curriculum, the absence of ethnic language teaching clearly constitutes a violation of the language rights of ethnic nationality children. The paper ponders over the possibility that the school curriculum might be used as a tool to assimilate the minorities. Koskinen (1995) argues that 'schools have always been the most important weapon of the state in assimilating minority children'. One of the reasons why ethnic groups in Burma have been fighting against the regime is 'language rights'. The ethnic rebel forces have been maintaining and promoting their language and culture while fighting for equality and self-determination in their territories.

In 1972, the New Mon State Party (NMSP)³ opened Mon National Schools in areas under their control – in rural parts of Thaton, Monlmein and Tavoy townships. There are 150 Mon National Schools. The medium of instruction in primary schools is the Mon language. In junior secondary schools, Mon history is taught in the Mon language and the other subjects are in Burmese. In senior secondary schools, the medium of instruction is Burmese. However, teachers of Mon language and literature run the risk of being punished by the regime. Some teachers including Buddhist monks have reportedly been arrested. In 1994, some 30 schools were ordered to close because of the teaching of the Mon language.

In 1995, the NMSP signed a cease-fire agreement with the present military regime. Under the agreement the Mon armed opposition group was allowed to operate the Mon national schools by the regime. However, in June 1998, 120 Mon schools attended by six thousand students were ordered to close by the local government authorities because of the teaching of the Mon language in these schools. The regime forbids implicitly the teaching of the Mon language in schools. According to a Kachin representative to the education seminar held in Chaing Mai, Thailand, from May 29 to June 2, 2000, the teaching of the Kachin language in schools had also been banned by the military regime since 1962.

³ An ethnic group, which joined the armed insurgency since national independence of Burma in 1948.

Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) also signed a cease-fire agreement with the regime. Even though a number of cease-fires have been signed between some ethnic insurgent groups and the military regime, the outlook remains uncertain: peace and development programmes in some border areas contrast with continuing fighting between the Burmese army and remaining ethnic armed forces in other areas (Smith, 2000). As the Mon experience illustrates, a particular concern of the cease-fire group is also for education and the allowance by the government of proper language rights.

The regime has changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar - which still constitutes a controversial matter. The regime's explanation is that Myanmar serves to represent all peoples in the country such as Burmans, Karen, Mon and so on. The regime also considers the Burmese language as the Myanmar language. It is not logical. If the name of the country is Myanmar, the language of the Burmans - or of any other ethnic group - should not be singled out as the Myanmar language⁴. In Switzerland, for example, there is no such thing as a Swiss language - people speak German or French. In Canada as well, there is no Canadian language. In Burma, peoples speak different languages - Karen, Mon, Shan, Burmese and so on, which should be granted an equal status.

4.2 Assimilation versus Excessive Nationalism

There is a divergent conception of the school curriculum between the regime and ethnic nationalities (e.g. Mon). On the one hand, the government's curriculum leads to Burmanisation. On the other hand, the school curricula in the ethnic nationality areas induce excessive nationalism, which can lead to xenophobia. For example, although both government schools and Mon national schools start to teach history at Standard III, the syllabuses are fundamentally different. The government schools teach about Burman kings and heroes such as *Anawyahta*, *Kyansittha*, *Bayinnaung*, *Alaungphya*, *Bandula*, *Bo-myat-tun* and king *Mindon*. Mon national schools teach about Mon kings, heroes and wise men such as king *Thamala*, minister *Minkansi*, minister *Dane*, hero *Tha-mane-bayan*, hero *Ma-san*, wise man *Ba-yarn*, king *Yazadavit* and hero *La-gon-ein*. Moreover, the Burmans and the Mon have conflicting view on history in that those who are considered as heroes on the Burman side are seen invaders on the Mon side following the occupation of the latter by the former. If the ethnic groups including the Burmans are willing to build a federal union, coherent education policies and curricula should be aimed at. This includes an agreed syllabus concerning the history subjects.

Let me report here a case of excessive nationalism from a primary school in an ethnic nationality area which anonymity is maintained. The Burmese primer is taught at the beginning of the primary level. Examples are: *Ka gji: kalei nge chi sa phwe* (The baby is lovely); *Kha gwei khaja athan tha* (The trumpet produces a pleasant sound) and so on. However, the school changes the sentence at *ba* and teaches: *Ba la chai bamar mjou: da: hnin htou:* (Stab the Burman!) while the original sentence is: *Ba la chai bala gji: hsin bjaun si:* (A strong man rides an elephant). Such kind of teaching clearly promotes racial hatred and should be discouraged.

⁴ Comment by Dr Kyaw Tha Tun, Goettingen University, Germany.

As a conclusion to Section 4, the paper calls for language rights and the rights to cultural identity for ethnic nationalities. At the same time, the paper insists on the need for every ethnic group to respect other ethnic languages and cultures. Moreover, the paper suggests the creation of a federal curriculum, which should be based on multicultural education for all ethnic nationalities, including Burmans.

In the following part, the paper will discuss the neglect of the teaching profession by the regime.

5. Teachers

Traditionally pupils have the same respect for their teachers as they have for Buddha and parents. Teachers enter the classroom with goodwill, interest and self-sacrifice (*seidana, wadhana, anina*). Nowadays, the role of teachers is depreciated due to the fact that teachers' salaries are very low and that they lack material support such as housing and transport as well as academic support such as pre-service and in-service trainings. The lack of trained teachers also affects the quality of teaching. In general, a university degree is the minimum qualification required to become a primary school teacher (Union of Myanmar, 1992). In some places, where there are not enough university graduates, people who have passed only the Basic Education High School (Standard X) examinations are allowed to teach primary grades (*ibid.*). These new recruits enter the classroom without initial teacher training. Some receive training after several years of teaching. In addition, over two-thirds of the primary schools are understaffed, especially in sparsely populated rural areas (Myanmar Education Research Bureau, 1992).

According to a government report (see Ministry of Education, 1998), some 57 per cent of primary school teachers, 58 per cent of junior secondary school teachers and 9 per cent of senior secondary school teachers have never attended a teacher training. After years of neglect regarding the teaching profession, the regime is now planning to introduce pre-service and in-service teacher trainings. However, these training programmes downgrade the level of primary school teachers. For example, after a first year training, only qualified trainees can continue to attend the training for junior secondary school teachers. Those who fail to qualify go to primary schools to be teachers. This programme therefore downgrades the importance of primary education as the foundation of social, moral and academic progress in that the system allows for unqualified candidates to teach primary school children. Again, after the second year training, qualified trainees can continue to attend the training for senior secondary school teachers those who did not do so well go and teach at junior secondary schools. In like manner, after another two-year secondary school teacher training, many have no other alternative but to go to senior secondary schools to be teachers due to unsatisfying examinations results. The best-qualified graduates can move on to post-graduate courses and follow master and doctorate degrees to become university lecturers.

I suggest promoting the status of teachers by offering them a better salary equivalent to other professions such as doctors and engineers and in terms of material support such as housing. Since primary education is as important as secondary education, all teachers should be treated equally. Teacher training institutions should recruit trainees according to the interests of the latter (i.e. a preference for primary education or for secondary education).

6. Conclusion

Evidently, education projects require a positive nationwide political commitment to education by government. Without a political solution to the Burmese situation, education is in turmoil.

Peace is a necessary condition to insure a long-term efficiency of the teachers' work as well as a continuity of learning for pupils, especially in the ethnic nationality areas, where instability regarding education has been most acute. However, peace should be based on broad political agreement rather than on a temporary cease-fire, which does not guarantee educational development (cf. Mon territory) and military impoverished ideas about national unity actually interfere with the development of the education system.

Compulsory education should be introduced in Burma in accordance with the fundamental purpose of education as contributing to the human development and in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 26 'everyone has the right to education...'

Schools should provide all pupils with a curriculum that:

- is balanced and broadly based;
- promotes their spiritual, moral, cultural and physical development;
- prepares them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life in a multicultural society (SCAA and ACAC, 1996; Tomlinson, 1996).

Moreover, I suggest a federal multicultural curriculum in order to promote 'language rights' and the rights to 'cultural identity' for all ethnic nationalities in Burma.

Teachers should be encouraged with academic and material supports such as training, adequate salary and housing.

Finally, policymakers, researchers and practitioners need to collaborate in order to improve the education system democratically. Researchers and practitioners are seen to be important parties in educational policy debates in many countries (Creemers *et al.*, 1998). However, policymakers in Burma (i.e. the military regime) usually make education policies in their own ways. The collaboration between policymakers, researchers and practitioners might be a constructive contribution to educational change in Burma.

References

Creemers, B., Reynolds, D., Chrispeels, J., Mortimore, P., Murphy, J., Stringfield, S., Stool, L. and Townsend, T (1998) Conference Report The Future of School Effectiveness and Improvement A Report on the Special Sessions and Plenary at ICSEI 1998 in Manchester.

CRPP (2000) The Report of the Education Committee 'Committee Representing People's Parliament' formed by MPs elected in the general election held in 1990 in Burma.

Inter-Agency Commission (1990) Final Report, World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs Inter-Agency Commission, WCEFA (UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank), 5-9 March 1990, Jomtien, Thailand. UNICEF House, New York.

Khin Maung Kyi, Findlay, R., Sundrum, R. M., Mya Maung, Myo Nyunt, Zaw Oo (2000) Economic Development of Burma: A Vision and a Strategy, a Study by Burmese Economic, Olof Palme International Centre, Sweden.

Koskinen, A. (1995) 'Language Policy towards Ethnic Minorities in Northern Norway and on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua' in Int. J. Educational Development Vol.15, No.3, pp.221-230.

Lwin, T. (1999) Education in Burma (1945-1999) published on the world wide web: <http://www.students.ncl.ac.uk/thein.lwin/>

Ministry of Education (1998) The Programme for Raising Education (first step) Ministry of Education, Union of Myanmar, December (Burmese text).

Myanmar Education Research Bureau (1992) Education Sector Study Phase 1, Final Report February, Ministry of Education / UNDP / UNESCO (MYA/90/004) Project, Yangon.

Office of the SUPDT (1947) The Report of the Education Reconstruction Committee SUPDT, Government Printing and Stationery, Rangoon, Burma.

Prospect Burma (2000) Burma's Educational Gap Years Our Programme <http://www.prospectburma.org>

SCAA and ACAC (1996) A Guide to the National Curriculum 'School Curriculum and Assessment Authority' and 'Curriculum and Assessment Authority of Wales', Great Britain.

Smith, M. (2000) Border Minorities Revisited presented by Martin Smith at the Britain-Burma Society in London, Tuesday 27 June.

Tomlinson, S. (1996) 'Ethnic Minorities, Citizenship and Education' in Demaine, J. and Entwistle, H. (eds) Beyond Communitarianism: Citizenship, Politics and Education Macmillan, London.

Union of Myanmar (1992) Education in Myanmar August, Ministry of Education, the Government of the Union of Myanmar, Yangon

Union of Myanmar (1998) Review of the Financial, Economic and Social Conditions for 1997/98 English translation, Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Yangon.

Email: Dr. Thein Lwin <edubur@gmail.com>