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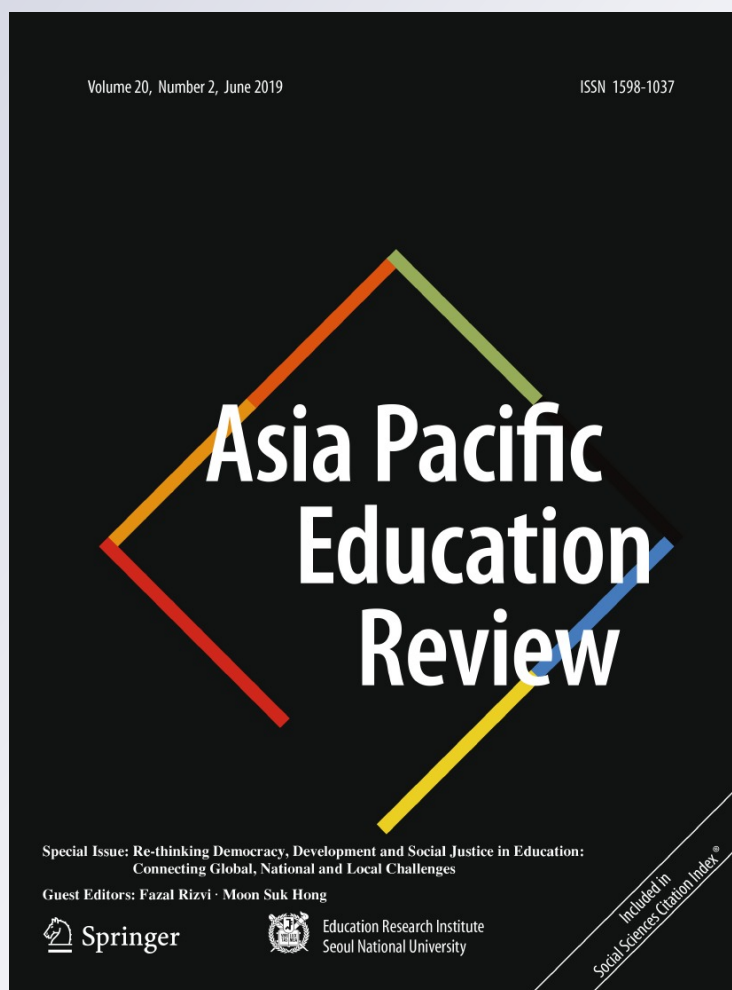
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Global justice, national education and local realities in Myanmar: a civil society perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines social justice in relation to the Myanmar education system, from the perspective of participation in decision-making; the social background of students; culture; language and local knowledge. It highlights the current state of education in Myanmar, including the national education law, the national education strategic plan and educational practice in different types of school systems. I argue that the education system in Myanmar is centralized and there is little space for stakeholders' participation in decision-making. Furthermore, the government is now promoting privatization in education, which increases inequality among social classes. Since the language and culture of the ruling majority Bamar (Myanmar) dominate the school curriculum, indigenous rights to education are neglected. Excluding local wisdom and indigenous knowledge can be considered as part of the colonization of knowledge, through the government education system. In conclusion, the paper suggests key changes that are needed to support a socially just and humanistic approach to education

Keywords Myanmar (Burma) · Social justice · Rights to education · Mother tongue-based education · Academic freedom

Abbreviations

CESR	Comprehensive Education Sector Review
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
MTB-MLE	Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education
NESP	National Education Strategic Plan
NLD	National League for Democracy
NNER	National Network for Education Reform
TBC	The Border Consortium
TCF	Thinking Classroom Foundation
UN	United Nations
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction

This paper sees the national education and local realities in Myanmar from a civil society perspective. It examines social justice in relation to the current education system. The author defines “social justice” based on the concept of human rights, equality, and social recognition. In his book “A Theory of Justice (1971)”, John Rawls states that “for justice to be truly just, everyone must be afforded the same rights under the law”. Further, social recognition for all stakeholders is important in the process of policy formation and implementation of education. Axel Honneth (2010) pointed out in his theory of recognition that “justice is always constituted through the expectation of respect for one’s own dignity and integrity”. If we deny social recognition, there may be negative consequences such as social unrest and violence. Since education and social justice are intrinsically connected in the development of open, democratic societies (Rawls 1971), this paper examines social justice in the Myanmar education system.

Burma/Myanmar can be considered a fragile state in terms of civil war since the 1960s and civil unrest such as violence and protests against the oppressive rules. National reconciliation is much-needed in Myanmar’s emergent democracy and this paper tries to contribute to a democratic and socially just society through education. In the following

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paper, some background information regarding education in Myanmar is provided to help non-Burmese/Myanmar readers to understand the states of education from the periods of national independence in 1948 to date. It is significant to note that there are schools running outside the government school systems. These schools have been run by the ethnic armed organizations in their controlled areas and community providers such as Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches. The paper highlights the educational needs of ethnic and faith-based communities.

The careful analysis of the national education law (2014) and the National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021) show recent education reform and its challenges in Myanmar's contemporary education. The critical aspects of Myanmar's education are highlighted as the eight fundamental challenges of the National Education Strategic Plan in light of citizen participations in education; rights to education; local curriculum; language policy; teachers' autonomy; student unions; education for the children with disabilities; and quality assurance.

Based on the above analysis, this paper discusses Myanmar's contemporary education from five critical perspectives: participatory perspective; socio-economic perspective; cultural perspective; language perspective; and local knowledge perspective. These five perspectives are considered since they are needed for an emergent democracy; sustainable socio-economic development; and the value of language and cultural identities of ethnic nationalities in Myanmar. In the conclusion, the paper provides recommendations on how education in Myanmar can be democratic and socially just in light of a humanistic vision of education.

Methodology

The following background information on education in Myanmar and analysis are mainly based on the author's previous research studies; action research through his works at the Thinking Classroom Foundation (TCF)¹ and the National Network for Education Reform (NNER)²; as well as document analysis of Myanmar's National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021).

For their doctoral thesis at the University of Newcastle, UK, the author conducted research on education policies in Burma (Myanmar) for the period of 1945–2000. The findings were published under the name of Education in Burma (1945–2000) (Lwin 2000). In 2007, the author undertook a

fellowship program at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington D.C., studying the federal education system in the United States. These findings were published under the name of Education and Democracy in Burma (Lwin 2007). Later in 2011, the author conducted research on the languages and identities of ethnic nationality groups living in Burma. The findings were published under the name of Languages, Identities, and Education—in Relation to Burma/Myanmar (Lwin 2011). The above findings were used as background information when writing this paper.

The author founded the TCF in 2001. The foundation provides teacher education for teachers working at schools run by ethnic armed organizations such as Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan; and schools run by Buddhist monasteries and Christian churches. There were a great deal of discussions around students, teachers, curriculum, assessment, teaching, and learning at these schools and in regions with teachers as a "community of practice". Furthermore, the author is also a founder of NNER which was founded in 2013. In 2013 alone, there were twenty-eight consultation meetings with students, teachers, and educators in the fourteen states and divisions of Myanmar. The NNER also organized seminars on decentralization in education; mother tongue-based multilingual education; teacher education; inclusive education; privatization in education; and education in a federal union. The knowledge constructed through the above discussions, consultation meetings, and seminars are also reflected in this paper.

In 2017, the Myanmar's Ministry of Education published the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) (2016–2021). Civil society education groups, including NNER, were never invited to consult on the strategic plan. As a result, the author read and analyzed the NESP and wrote comments on it. These comments were published in Myanmar language on Moe-Ma-Ka Burmese News & Media (www.moemaka.com) under the title "Comments on National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021)". The English version of the comments (Lwin 2017) is reflected in this paper.

Education in Myanmar: the background

Myanmar (also known as Burma) is inhabited by over one hundred ethnic nationality groups. Between 1885 and 1886 Burma came under British rule. It later gained its independence in 1948 and was ruled by an elected governments until the Burma army took power in a coup in 1962. Since then students opposed the military regime. In 1990, the military government held election, and The National League for Democracy (NLD) won the election, but the result was ignored. Again, in 2010, the regime held another election and the military-backed party won the election and formed a civilian government. At that time, the NLD decided not to

¹ Thinking Classroom Foundation (TCF) is registered in Chiang Mai, Thailand to provide teacher education.

² National Network for Education Reform (NNER) is a civil education network for education policy advocacy operating in Myanmar.

Table 1 A chronology of key political events and educational transitions

Political events	Educational transitions
1824 British colonial rule began in lower Burma	Monastery-based education
1885 The whole Burma became under British rule	Colonial system of education
1948 Burma became independent	National system of education
1962 Military took power in a coup	Education under the “Burmese Way to Socialism”
1988 Democratic uprising	Education under the military regime
1990 Election: NLD won a landslide, but the result was ignored	Education under the military regime (40 percent of children never attend schools)
2008 New constitution allocated 25% of seats in parliament to military	Education under the military regime (Compulsory primary education is stated)
2010 Election: military-backed party USDP formed government	Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) is conducted by the government
2015 Election: NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi formed government (but in a hybrid regime combining the NLD and military)	national education law was approved in September 2014 and Amended in June 2015

Data source Myanmar Profile—Timeline (BBC September 3, 2018) and (Lwin 2000, 2017)

contest the election as its leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest. In 2012, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest and contested in the by-election and entered the parliament. In 2015, the NLD won by a landslide and formed the government. However, twenty-five percent of the parliamentary seats and three ministerial posts (military, home affairs and border affairs) are still occupied by the army.

In the last 70 years, Burma/Myanmar has experienced several periods of political upheaval, each of which has significantly impacted the country's education system. See the chronology of key political events and educational transition in Table 1.

The first educational transition occurred in 1948 and was from the colonial system of education to a national system of education. The second educational transition happened after 1962 and was from a national education to the so-called ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ education. From 1988 to 2010, the country's education noticeably deteriorated in such a way that almost 40% of children never attend school and almost three-quarters failed to complete even primary education (Lwin 2000). In September 2014, the national education law was approved by both the parliament and military-backed government. However, students protested against the national education law, which is highly centralized and restricts academic freedom. In June 2015, an amendment of the national education law was enacted with small changes.

School system and types of schools in Myanmar

This paper highlights the different school systems as well as different types of schools to help readers better understand the states of education in Myanmar. Since civil war broke

out after the military coup in 1962, the ethnic armed groups have controlled remote regions near China and Thailand border and opened schools for the children living in these regions. In addition to these, Buddhist and Christian religious groups have also opened schools for their religious communities. There are multiple different kinds of schools operating in the country today. They are: public schools and universities, private schools, tuition classes, monastery-based schools, church-based schools, schools run by ethnic armed organizations and schools in conflict areas and refugee camps (Lwin 2000, 2007, 2011, 2017).

Public schools and universities

The school system is currently 5–4–2, with 5-years of primary, 4 years of lower secondary and 2 years of upper secondary education. The Ministry of Education is planning to upgrade to a KG+12 system that involves 1 year of early childhood education, 5 years primary, 4-years lower secondary and 3-years upper secondary education. In 2016, there were 9,257,970 students, 340,955 teachers and 47,363 schools in the basic education sector (primary and secondary) run by the government, Buddhist monks and the private sector. Table 2 shows the number of students, teachers, and schools in 2016 (Ministry of Education of Myanmar 2016). Apart from these schools, there are a number of schools run by ethnic armed organizations, Christian churches, and local communities.

Since the 2015–2016 academic year, the Ministry of Education has introduced new textbooks for KG, Grade One and Grade Two—one in each year (Ministry of Education of Myanmar 2016). These new textbooks are based on old textbook contents with only superficial changes to the color of the pictures and some of the comprehension questions. Some teachers from these grades were provided summer

Table 2 Schools, teachers and students of public education

School category	No. of basic education schools (2016)	No. of basic education teachers (2016)	No. of basic education students (2016)
Upper secondary	3513	34,393	873,832
Lower secondary	6224	129,945	2,795,607
Primary	35,650	158,176	5,184,041
Monastic	1538	11,044	279,039
Private	438	7397	107,451
Total	47,363	340,955	9,257,970

Data source Ministry of Education, Myanmar

training by the government to use these new textbooks and utilize a child-centered approach. However, schools are still practicing content-based and rote learning approaches to teaching. The assessment system is summative, the same as it was before.

In higher education, there are 163 universities run by 13 ministries, including the Ministries of Education, Health, Technology, Defense, Agriculture and Religious Affairs. Universities in Myanmar are not multi-faculty like in democratic countries (Ministry of Education of Myanmar 2016). They are rather single discipline universities, respectively focused on subjects such as medicine, engineering, economics, arts, and science, centrally managed by the relevant ministries. According to the national education law (2014), universities are allowed to prepare charters to set themselves up as an autonomous university. This is still in process (Table 3).

Private schools

The issues of private schools was discussed at a seminar organized by the National Network for Education Reform (NNER) in Yangon on 22–23 June 2018. The seminar highlighted the states of private schools in Myanmar in light of human rights principles. After the military coup in 1962, all private schools and Church-based schools were nationalized. At the time, the government announced that

The Revolutionary Council believes the existing educational system un-equated with livelihood will have to be transformed. An educational system equated with livelihood and based on socialist moral values will be brought about; Science will be given precedence in education (Nyi Nyi 1972; Lwin 2000).

However, the education system was under centralized control under the military regime since 1962 (Lwin 2000). Academic freedom was severely restricted and breaches were persecuted which restricted freedom of speech and assembly. The insights and will of teachers, students, and their parents were subservient to state priorities for social control. The government used education as a tool for its own political and economic agenda. After the 2010

election, the government created the Private Education Law and many private schools subsequently appeared. However, many of these newly created schools are for-profit private schools. Other commercial schools are registered under the Business Company Act and provide education services for profit (NNER 2018). Since they do not receive any support from the government, these private schools charge student fees. And although some of the founders of private schools have the educational goal to provide quality education (NNER 2018), as well as ideals to implement alternative models of education, they are not allowed to use their own curriculum. They can use only the government school curriculum and sit government exams at the expense of students and their parents. According to the Ministry of Education, there were 438 private schools with 107,451 students enrolled in the academic year 2015–2016. The number of commercial and private schools are currently increasing.

Table 3 Universities per Ministry

Ministries	Number of Universities
1 Ministry of Education	66
2 Ministry of Health	15
3 Ministry of Science and Technology	61
4 Ministry of Defense	5
5 Ministry of Culture	2
6 Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry	1
7 Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation	1
8 Ministry of Livestock Breeding and Fisheries	1
9 Ministry of Co-Operatives	5
10 Ministry of Union Civil Service Board	1
11 Ministry of Religious Affairs	1
12 Ministry of Border Affairs	2
13 Ministry of Transport	2
Total (13 ministries)	163

Data source Ministry of Education, Myanmar

Tuition classes

Apart from private schools, there are external tuition classes. Believing the quality of teaching is low at government schools, students and their parents rely on extra tuition classes after school hours and on the weekends (Lwin 2000, 2007; NNER 2018). Some students take one or two subjects that they identify as needing improvement where as others take all subjects in the curriculum (Lwin 2000, 2007; NNER 2018). These tuition classes are generally only focused on preparation for the students' exams. They do not teach the whole curriculum but provide answers for expected questions in the exam. The assessment system in Myanmar schools is summative, based on memorizing and recalling facts. In addition, the university entrance system is based on the final year of secondary school exam scores. Therefore, students attend tuition classes that prepare them for exams (Lwin 2000, 2007; NNER 2018).

The education law allows private teachers to register to open tuition classes for particular subjects. Some government school and university teachers teach extra tuition classes unofficially. External tuition classes are growing throughout the country, from KG to tertiary education. Some classes are crowded with over one hundred students. Some are smaller with about ten students but with similar fees to those with one hundred student class. In addition, some rich parents hire private teachers to teach their children at home. I myself worked as a private teacher to teach mathematics from 1984 to 1988.

Monastery-based schools

Burmese (Myanmar) people received education from Buddhist monasteries before the British colonization (Lwin 2000, 2007). Under the British administration, the urban middle-class received the education from British-system schools. The people in rural areas, though relied on Buddhist monasteries for their education. After independence, the public-school system was established with the aim of compulsory primary education. However, some Buddhist monasteries continue to run their schools in cities as well as villages. According to the Ministry of Education, 297,039 students were enrolled at 1538 Buddhist monastery schools in 2016 (Ministry of Education of Myanmar 2016). These schools use the government school curriculum and students sit government exams. Buddhist monastery schools are officially allowed under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The law allows only primary level of education, however, some monastery schools provide secondary education, where students register at nearby government schools but attend classes at the monastery. Monastic schools are largely supported by the Buddhist communities and the regime does not need to use its budget. However, other religious

communities—such as Christian and Muslim—are not allowed to open schools, aside from a few Christian organizations running schools in rural areas (Lwin 2007).

Church-based schools

The majority of Myanmar people are Buddhist, while significant numbers of Kachin, Karen, Karenni and Chin ethnic minorities are Christian (CNN Library 2018). Since government schools do not operate in remote ethnic regions, due to fighting between ethnic armed organizations and government troops, local communities have opened schools at churches for the education of their children. In some ethnic villages, there are government schools, but the language of instruction at government schools is the Myanmar language. Many children from ethnic minority communities do not understand Myanmar language and many children drop out after 1 or 2 years at government schools. They then commonly join church-based schools where they can learn in their mother tongue. In this way, the number of church-based schools increases. There is no statistical data regarding church-based schools and the number of schools is currently unknown. An education foundation, the Thinking Classroom Foundation, is working with some of the church-based schools and has learnt that different churches, such as the Catholic Church, Baptist Church, and Seventh-Day Adventist Church run schools for their religious communities. It is estimated that there are hundreds of church-based schools in Myanmar. According to the teachers from church-based schools who have attended the authors teacher training, church-based schools use their own curriculum within their local context. Since these schools are not recognized by the government, the future education of these students is unclear.

Schools run by ethnic armed organizations

Civil war broke out in the 1960s and since then peace negotiations have failed each time between the military regime and the ethnic armed organizations, that have been fighting for self-determination (Tharckabaw 2018). During the decades-long struggle, children still needed to learn, therefore, the ethnic armed organizations created schools in the jungle. According to recent updates by Thinking Classroom Foundation, the Kachin Independence Organization run about 200 primary and secondary schools, in addition colleges. The Karen National Union run about 500 primary and secondary schools as well as colleges in their controlled areas. The Karenni National Progressive Party run about 100 schools including primary, secondary and colleges on the Thai-Myanmar border and in their controlled areas. The New Mon State Party and the Shan State Army each run about 200 schools. In addition, ceasefire groups also run schools in their regions. There are over 1000 schools

attended by over 100,000 students. Apart from the New Mon State Party, other ethnic armed organizations have created their own school curriculum and use their local languages, or a blend of their local language and Burmese, as the medium of instruction according to the teachers from schools run by ethnic armed organizations, who have attended the authors' teacher training from 2000 to date. The New Mon State Party uses the Myanmar Government school curriculum and students sit government exams; however, they teach Mon language and history at schools. These schools are supported by their respective communities and some NGOs.

Schools in conflict areas and refugee camps

During the decade-long civil war, many villagers have run away from the fighting and their burning houses. Many villagers hide in the jungle and the number of internally displaced persons (IDP) is increasing (The Border Consortium 2018). During the recent fighting in Kachin State, northern Myanmar, many hundreds of villagers lost their homes and fled from their villages for their safety. During the violence, which started on 25 August 2017, against the Rohingya community in northern Rakhine State, western Myanmar, thousands of Rohingya men, women, and children were shot and burned in a matter of weeks; masses of Rohingya women and girls were raped; infant children were killed; men and boys were arbitrarily arrested; several hundred villages were destroyed in arson attacks; and more than 700,000 people were forced to flee to neighboring Bangladesh (Fortify Rights 2018; Bangkok Post 2018). There are approximately one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh including 300,000 who arrived in Bangladesh as a result of the violence that had occurred in previous years (Bearak 2017). Among the Rohingya refugees, more than half are women and girls, 60% are children under the age of 18 (Oxfam 2018). Since the crackdown on the mass uprising against the military regime in 1988 and fighting between the Myanmar army and ethnic armed organizations, many thousands of people have fled to Thailand. According to UNHCR (2018), there are 97,418 refugees from Myanmar living in nine refugee camps on the Thai–Myanmar border. Among them, 54.4% are children under the age of 18 (The Border Consortium 2018).

For IDP children, it is difficult to get schooling. Nearby communities often try to open schools to provide education for these children. Recently, two primary school teachers from an IDP community school in Kachin State where about 500 students attend, were present at the Intensive Teacher Training run by the authors' organization, the Thinking Classroom Foundation. According to these teachers, children are traumatized by their stressful experiences because of the war. For Shan displaced persons, there are no refugee camps in Thailand. Many Shan people are internally displaced and

some illegally migrated into Thailand. The number of IDPs and illegal immigrants is unknown. Rohingya children also face difficulties to receive education because of violence in Myanmar and refugee life in Bangladesh. It is also difficult for the Bangladeshi government to provide schooling for many children in temporary shelters.

For refugee children on the Thai–Myanmar border, early childhood and primary education started in the 1990s in the camps. After primary education, schools upgraded upper grades and now there are high schools (upper secondary) and colleges running in Karen, Karenni and Mon camps. Some refugee schools use Myanmar government school curriculum and some schools use Karen or Karenni school curriculum. Many schools also teach Thai language. However, young people who completed secondary education and colleges in camps cannot pursue higher education or vocational training or get jobs because they are not allowed to leave the camps. To fill this gap, ethnic education and church organizations have established vocational and college-level programs in camps and ceasefire areas of eastern Myanmar, although they face major challenges in funding, human resources and a lack of accreditation according to teachers from schools run by ethnic armed organizations.

Major education policies and law: recent reform and challenges

National education law (2014) and its amendment (2015)

In October 2012, the Thinking Classroom Foundation, chaired by the author, invited civil society education groups including student unions, teacher unions, ethnic-based education groups, faith-based education groups, disabled education groups and educators organized a meeting to discuss various issues in education and create suggestions to give to parliament and the government regarding democratic education reform. In early 2013, there were three parallel groups prepared to give their recommendations to contribute to the national education law. They were the then government, parliament and NNER. NNER is a civil society education coalition formed in early 2013 that includes student unions, teacher unions, indigenous education groups, faith-based education groups, disabled education groups and educators.

The national education law was approved by the parliament and the government in September 2014. Both the government and parliament drafted the national education law separately in early 2014. During the drafting process, the NNER including student unions, teacher unions, ethnic and civil society education groups provided their suggestions to both parliament and government. However, these students, teachers, ethnic groups and civil society groups

were excluded from participation in the forum on national education law. The two drafts prepared by parliament and government were combined by the law drafting committee of the parliament and was approved.

The approved national education law is highly centralized. It does not value the right to education of students, teachers and indigenous communities. Inclusive education is not guaranteed. Indigenous rights to education are neglected. Mother tongue-based education is not allowed but Myanmar language dominates classroom practice as the sole language of instruction. The curriculum is also centralized with no room for local wisdom and indigenous knowledge. Academic freedom is not guaranteed and freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of association are not mentioned in the law.

Student unions boycotted the national education law soon after its approval (Fisher 2014). In early 2015, they marched from Mandalay to Yangon, a distance of about 400 miles, requesting a dialogue among students, parliament, government and the NNER for amendment of the national education law.

The government agreed to hold a four-party dialogue. After three meetings among the four parties, the government accepted the eleven-point demands of the student unions. The eleven points include stakeholders' participation in education decision-making, academic freedom, inclusive education, mother tongue-based multilingual education, freedom of association for students and teachers and for 20% of the national budget to be spent on education. After the above four-party agreement, the students who participated in the March were beaten and arrested on 10 March 2015 when they arrived at Lapadan, which is about forty miles from Yangon (Aung San Suu Kyi 2015). In June 2015, the parliament enacted the amendment of the national education law, taking few points from the agreed eleven-point demand (Myanmar Law Library 2015).

National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021)

The National Education Strategic Plan was published in early 2017 and was based on the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) done by the previous (2010–2015) government. It has nine categories to be implemented within 5 years (Fig. 1). The categories include kindergarten education, basic education, higher education, vocational education, alternative education, teacher education, management, assessment, and quality assurance. The following diagram shows the nine categories of the National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021). I argue that the national plan has various fundamental weaknesses in terms of addressing the needs of students, teachers and marginalized groups in the country, and the global initiative of Sustainable Development Goals No. 4 (Education 2030) (Lwin 2017).

Fundamental challenges of NESP discussed

There was no consultation with regards to the national plan with civil society education groups, including the student unions, teachers' unions and right-based education groups. It was not publicly known until it was published in 2017. The following paragraphs are the analysis of NESP (2016–2021). It is found that the NESP does not meet the democratic principles and rights to education.

Little space for CSOs

Myanmar was under centralized control for many years under the military dictatorship. However, after the 2010 election, the country is moving towards a democracy and education policymaking should be inclusive with the participation of all stakeholders, including students and teachers. When the national education law was approved in 2014, students boycotted and opposed the law because the drafting process excluded CSOs and their opinions. The government should have learned lessons when they drew up the national strategic plan.

Lack of consideration on Indigenous Rights to Education

It can be clearly seen that there is no aspect of educational reform in the National Education Strategic Plan that will pave the way to a federal democratic system. While the State Counselor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is heading the twenty-first Century Panglong Peace Dialogue in order to establish a federal democratic union, the education strategic plan should include the Right to self-determination of the indigenous people. The Ethnic Armed Organizations, which are currently in peace talks with the government, have been setting up schools and providing education in their respective controlled areas for many years. There are a number of students who have completed basic education levels in their schools. However, there is no space in the National Education Strategic Plan to recognize indigenous education. Myanmar is one of the signatories to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations 2007). As per Article (14) of the Declaration, it is a prerogative to recognize schools established by indigenous people, their local school curriculum, teachers and students. Since there is no recognition from the government, the students of the indigenous-schools face difficulty to transfer to government schools and national universities.

The need to recognize the local curriculum

Regarding curriculum, the National Education Strategic Plan states the importance of skills for the twenty-first



Fig. 1 Nine categories of National Education Strategic Plan (NESP). Data source Ministry of Education of Myanmar (2016)

century, the need to improve the capacity of curriculum developers and to provide training to teachers so that they are familiar with the curriculum and reader text. Meaning, that the curriculum and reader texts will be made by the central government. Along these lines, the reader texts for KG level to Grade Two has already been developed by the central government, without consultation. The history of Myanmar education has proven that curriculum made by the central government has failed to meet the needs of the respective regions and indigenous people. Since the curriculum used in government schools all over Myanmar is made and produced by the central government alone, it reflects the culture and values of the curriculum developers in the central government. As a result of the curriculum produced by the government, students in ethnic regions may not be happy in school. Since Myanmar is inhabited by peoples of diverse cultures, customs, and languages, it is imperative to allow local curriculum produced in a

community's own context, so as to fulfill the requirements of ethnic diversity.

Mother tongue-based multilingual education

For basic education, the National Education Strategic Plan states that ethnic languages and culture will be allowed in learning. Though this seems to provide room for ethnic languages to be taught, there are a number of difficulties while the Ministry of Education implements it in practice. The difficulties are that ethnic languages are taught only in the evening class, not in school hours; Myanmar reader texts are translated into ethnic languages for teaching, and; there is a lack of teachers for ethnic languages. Students are less interested in evening class as they are exhausted from the regular classroom hours during the day, they need to fulfill family duties and are often required to attend extra tuition classes. Since the subjects and lessons taught are also

translated from the Myanmar text, they are not related to the cultures of the ethnic people and local context, and hence they are bound to face difficulties in learning. Furthermore, teachers are directly appointed by the Ministry of Education without space for the local communities to choose teachers locally. As a result, teachers posted in ethnic states often fail to understand the language and culture of local people.

Teachers' autonomy

The section on teachers in the National Education Strategic Plan says the existing system, where teachers are promoted level by level from primary school to middle school to high school based on time served will be replaced with a system where teachers are promoted or transferred according to their performance. In outlining this initiative, the Minister of Education said, in a 2017 speech made that teachers with poor performance would be transferred to the remote regions. Since the statement means that remote regions and ethnic minority states deserve only the bad teachers, a lot of criticism on social media has emerged of this plan. In the Myanmar education system, it is clear that only the central government decides on matters related to teachers, such as promotion and transfer to other schools and regions. This robs teachers of their freedom. A teacher should have the right to decide the region and school where they wish to work. Also, the concerned region and school should have the right to choose to appoint teachers in accordance with their needs. The Center should not control teachers' choice in postings. Moreover, teachers should be allowed to choose their preferred level (primary, middle or high school) and subject specialization by the time they are admitted to their respective schools. Teachers of different educational levels should also be equally respected.

The formation of student unions

It is found that the NESP of the Ministry of Education does not include a provision on the formation of student unions. The national education law (2014) and Amendment Act (2015) have included procedures for the formation of student unions in accordance with the respective university charter. However, university charters have not been drawn up yet. It states that this is only to be drafted as a process in the 5-year planning period.

Education of the children with disabilities

It is also seen that the national education law, Amendment Act and NESP only prioritize special schools. Children with disabilities living in an area where a special school is not available have difficulty getting opportunities to study. According to the education groups working for children with

disabilities that are members of the NNER, there are several cases where these children have been denied admission in schools in several places last year. It is essential to enact a law that provides equitable opportunities for the children with disabilities to study in any school they wish.

The quality assurance and local context

The Quality Assurance System of the Ministry of Education is mentioned in NESP as a major driving force. The experiences show that the quality set by the Center is not in line with the needs of the local context. The indicators in the current system for quality education are determined based on student scores in central examinations and the pass rate of schools. Such an assessment system encourages students to memorize lessons, take examinations by heart and cheat. Thus, the system cannot determine the quality of teachers and students. If the quality criteria are set solely by an individual or a group in the central government, the criteria are influenced by that individual or group alone and cannot represent the values and principles of other stakeholders.

Discussion

This paper argues that the Myanmar Government's National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021) fails to meet the needs of democratic education reform in the light of participatory decision-making, inclusive education, rights to education, and academic freedom. In the following paragraphs, the paper discusses Myanmar's education system from the perspectives of participation in decision-making; the social background of students; their culture; language and local knowledge. I argue that the Myanmar education system lacks consideration of social justice and creates inequality of opportunity among students.

Participatory perspective

An absence of participation has occurred in the Myanmar education system that denies stakeholders the chance to participate fully in drawing education policies, laws, and the decision-making process, which is unjust. Under the authoritarian regimes from 1962 to 2010, there was no space for civil society to participate in decision-making at any levels, local to national. After 2010, civil society education actors expected some space for participatory decision-making in education. When the government and parliament started drafting the national education law in 2012, the NNER held public consultations on education reform 28 times in the fourteen States and Divisions of the country and submitted findings to the government and parliament. After two or three meetings at the *Seinyatu* Hall of Rangoon University

in 2013 and 2014 between authorities and NNER members, the government finally turned down NNER's proposal. The major differences between the government and NNER were 'centralization and decentralization' in educational management; and 'heteronomous thought and autonomous thought' in teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment as Steel (1998) pointed out in their book, "Further Strategies for Promoting Critical Thinking". Furthermore, the government failed to recognize the right to participate in education, including indigenous rights to participation (United Nations 2007). Justice requires social arrangements that permits all stakeholders to participate as peers in social life (Walford 2013). It is not only important for society, but also important for education.

Socio-economic perspective

As a result of crony capitalism, the distribution of wealth in Myanmar is unequal among citizens. The ruling army generals and cronies have immense wealth while most ordinary citizens face hardships in their daily life, including obtaining food, shelter, health, and education. According to the World Bank Group (2014), an estimated poverty rate of Myanmar is 37.5% of the population. Poverty is twice as high in rural areas and heavily concentrated in conflict-affected areas (World Bank Group 2014).

Because of low-quality teaching and an exam-oriented education system, students are pressured to take extra tuition classes to get higher scores in their exam. University entrance is also based on exam scores. Those who can pay extra tuition fees get higher scores in the exam and can choose subjects they prefer at university. Those who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and from rural areas often cannot afford to take extra tuition and fail their exams or obtain lower scores. They then give up their education or are directed to take subjects at university that they are not interested in because of their lower scores. This creates unequal opportunities in education among young people.

Currently, the number of private-owned schools is increasing every year. Most of the private-owned schools are for-profit commercial operations. The government seems to encourage the private sector in education as a stopgap, because of their low education spending. Educational spending under the military regime was about 2% of the national budget, 4% under the previous government and 7.5% under the current government, while the international norm is 15–20% of the national budget.

Since the quality of education is low in the government system in terms of the 4As (available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable), students and their parents prefer to choose private schools if they can afford it, hoping that they may get better educational outcomes. However, many families

are living below the poverty line (World Bank Group 2014) and they cannot afford to choose private education. If justice is a social and societal concern, then socially just educational outcomes must benefit everyone and society as a whole, rather than some individuals at the expense of others (MacPherson 2013). I would suggest that it is the government's obligation to respect, protect and fulfill the right to quality education for everyone on the basis of non-discrimination and equality.

Cultural perspective

The Ministry of Education exercises centralized control and all schools under the government have to use the government curriculum. Since curricula and school textbooks are designed by the ruling elites, the values and belief systems of the ruling majority Bamar (Myanmar) dominate the culture of indigenous groups. According to the authors recent study on the Burmese (Myanmar) language textbooks for primary schools, it was found that the tradition, culture, and social norms prevailed over all texts, poems and pictures (Lwin 2016).

The inhabitants in Myanmar belong to diverse linguistic groups such as Austro-Asiatic (Mon, Palaung, Wa), Malay-Polynesian (Salon), Burmese-Lolo (Burmese, Rakhine, Lahu, ...), Kuki-Naga (Chin and its dialects), Kachin (Jingphaw, Maru, Rawang, ...), Karen (Pa-O, Pwo, Sgaw, Kayah, ...) and Tai (Shan) (Allott et al. 1989). These linguistic groups belong to a variety of cultural identities. However, the ruling elites fail to recognize the identity of indigenous people who suffer socio-cultural oppression. The problem lies with the dominant culture's failure to acknowledge the existence of cultural diversity that is necessary for indigenous people to be 'culturally autonomous' (Cuch 1987).

Language perspective

In the Burmese education system, the teaching of minority languages has been prohibited in state schools since 1962, and that policy remains in place today (Lwin 2011) although Myanmar has an estimated population of 51 million, consisting of diverse ethnic groups speaking over 100 languages and dialects as stated above. The medium of instruction at government schools all over the country is Burmese (Myanmar). As a result, it is difficult for the children of non-Burmese speaking groups to get schooling, and dropout rates are high before finishing primary education. Hence, one of the reasons ethnic armed organizations fight against the central government is for their language rights. Indigenous and rights-based education groups such as Karen Education Organizations, Karenni Education Organizations, Mon Education Organizations, Shan Education Organizations have

demanded the government to introduce Mother Tongue-Based MultiLingual Education (MTB-MLE).

However, the government fails to recognize MTB-MLE. Educational experts and researchers have found key benefits in MTB-MLE as it benefits student access education; improves reading and learning outcomes; facilitates learning a second or foreign language; improves educational efficiency; improves children's self-awareness and identity; supports local culture and promotes critical thinking (RTI International 2018; MLE GE 2016). Therefore, I argue that there is a need to take into consideration MTB-MLE in light of the linguistic diversity that exists in Myanmar. Linguistic diversity is a positive characteristic of the country and safeguarding this diversity is an important task for its citizens (Lwin 2011). I believe that such a system will provide the space for local communities to participate in the education sector and, respecting local languages and cultures is essential for building peace in the country.

Local knowledge perspective

This paper suggests that the education system needs to acknowledge indigenous knowledge and local wisdom and allow local curriculum for the education of indigenous people. It should also introduce a critical pedagogy that promotes active learning and critical thinking (Steel 1998). In the Myanmar education system, the curriculum is fact-oriented, reflecting the supremacy of values and beliefs of the ruling majority Bamar (Myanmar); teaching and learning are based on rote learning; and assessment is purely based on the memorization of facts—a banking model (Lwin 2000, 2007, 2016). According to Paulo Freire (1970), a banking model of education treats students as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge. Freire rejects the banking model, claiming it results in the dehumanization of both the students and the teachers. In addition, he argues that the banking approach stimulates oppressive attitudes and practices. For the children of indigenous people, it can be considered as the 'colonization of knowledge' that undermines the consciousness of indigenous sovereignty (d'Errico 2011). Therefore, this paper suggests that indigenous knowledge and local wisdom should be recognized in relation to the indigenous rights to education.

Conclusion

In this paper, the author has highlighted eight fundamental challenges of Myanmar's National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021): the space for CSOs; indigenous rights to education; local curriculum; mother tongue-based education; teachers' autonomy; formation of student unions; education for the children with disability; and quality assurance. Based

on these analysis, the paper has examined social justice in relation to the Myanmar education system, from the critical perspectives of participation in decision-making; socio-economic background of students; culture; language; and local knowledge.

For education in Myanmar to become democratic and socially just, the following changes are required: (i) participatory justice that allows people the chance to participate fully in decision-making; (ii) the government needs to meet its obligation to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunity for all; (iii) the existence of cultural diversity that is necessary for indigenous people to be culturally autonomous needs to be acknowledged; (iv) mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) needs to be implemented in light of the linguistic diversity that exists in the country; and (v) indigenous knowledge and local wisdom needs to be afforded recognition, through the creation of local curricula for the education of indigenous people within the Myanmar education system. Finally, I propose, as UNESCO suggested in its Rethinking Education (2015), a humanistic vision of education that constitutes learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together.

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