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Education in Burma¹: Hope for the Future

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Abstract

The paper explores the current educational situation in Burma and educational activities outside Burma based on the exiled author's work for the education of Burmese children and teacher education. Education in Burma has deteriorated at all levels in terms of equity, quality and efficiency during many years under the military regime. Burmese schools have predominantly offered teacher-centered and subject-oriented teaching and rote learning. There is a lack of teacher training and a weak curriculum. The regime uses education as a political tool preventing children from learning how to think. Thousands of people from Burma have fled into Thailand because of political instability and economic deprivation. Some are living in refugee camps and many more are living illegally throughout Thailand. Schools run by ethnic armed opposition groups in refugee camps are dominated by those groups' political ideologies and nationalism. The children of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand have little opportunity to attend school. The paper explores the plight of Burmese youngsters and their education. It describes the work of the 'Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers' in filling the gap in education by providing teacher training, improving the quality of education focusing on active learning, critical thinking and democratic practice in the classroom, education for adult learners, a primary school project and a library. Finally, the paper invites debate on educational reform and seeks advice from the Asian education community in improving Burma's education.

1. Introduction

This is a practical paper based on six years experience of educational work rather than on academic research or theories. The author is an educator providing teacher training and educational advice to teachers, students, educators and political activists of Burma. In the following paragraphs, the paper critically reviews the educational situation inside Burma in the areas of public schools, Buddhist monastic schools, private schools and higher education. It also reports on the educational situation in refugee camps and the plight of Burmese youngsters including the children of migrant workers in Thailand. The paper then explains about a teacher education program, Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) project, primary school project, migrant learning center and library. In

¹ The current regime changed the country's name to 'Myanmar', but many Burmese people still use 'Burma'. The term 'Burma' will be used in this paper as it is widely used in English version. In Burmese version 'Myanmar' is widely used.

the conclusion, the paper highlights some obstacles the program is facing and seeks advice from the Asian education community in improving Burma's education.

2. Some Background of Education in Burma

Burma has been governed by military regime since 1962. Burmese people received traditional Buddhist education in the past. Under British colonial rule, the school system and curricula were changed. After independence in 1948, it was changed from colonial education to national education. In 1962, after a military coup it was changed again from national education to so-called socialist education. In 1988, there was a nationwide democratic uprising under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi. Burma is expected to return to democracy and it is hoped that the next change will bring democratic educational change. However, under the military regime, education is deteriorating in every area such as children's access to education, curriculum, teaching and students' progress.

Children in rural areas as well as children of poor families in the cities have little chance to attend school because of lack of schools and economic deprivation. The dropout rate from school is very high. According to a recent study (Thein Lwin, 2003)², almost 40 per cent of children never attend school and almost three-quarters fail to complete primary education. There is a different reckoning on the adult literacy rate between the regime and other sources. The regime claim the literacy rate is 80 per cent while other estimates put it at less than 60 per cent. The regime argues that children learn reading and writing at Buddhist monasteries although they do not attend public school. It is true that the regime allows Buddhist monasteries to open primary schools. Children learn reading, writing and Buddhism. With regard to functional literacy, however, which is required for workers to work efficiently with appropriate skills in agriculture, industry or other sectors, children need at least nine years of compulsory education.

Public Schools

Today's public schools are extremely poor in terms of equity, quality and efficiency. Schools do not treat students equally. Students who are the children of government officials and who pay bribes to teachers are privileged. Many teachers enter the classroom without proper training. Curriculum is textbook based and is just concerned with memorizing facts in science, history, geography and so on. Teachers use an authoritative role in teaching. It seems that the regime uses education as a political tool by preventing children from learning how to think. Young people are expected to be disciplined in and out of school under the military regime. The notion of discipline invokes ideas of loyalty and the image of obedient citizens.

Monastic Education

Thanks to Buddhist monks, children who never enrolled in secular schools can still learn the three R's in monasteries. These children learn literacy, numeracy, sciences, history and geography as well as Buddhism. From the political, social and religious points of view, however, monastic schools should be reconsidered. Monastic schools are officially allowed by the regime under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. It is likely that monastic

² Education in Burma (1945-2000). The paper can be viewed at: www.educationburma.org/

schools are supported by 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. It is not a fair policy. Even in the eyes of Buddhists, schools should be supported by the government and monasteries should be the place for Buddhism. It is difficult for the children of other religious communities to send their children to Buddhist monastic schools.

Private Schools

There are some private schools operating in the city of Rangoon. Since children do not receive quality education in the public schools, parents want to send their children to private schools with western teachers and qualified local teachers. School fees are high and only the ruling class and rich people can send their children to such schools. There are huge discrepancies between the children of different social classes in pursuing their education. The private schools mostly focus on the mastery of English language. Parents want their children to speak good English - hoping that they will send their children to the English speaking countries to work or to continue their studies.

Higher Education

The regime has opened many new universities in different regions and proudly announces the number of graduates each year. However, it is just quantity rather than quality. Even so, in terms of quantity, many young people do not finish their primary or secondary education, and only a small percentage of young people can join university courses. In terms of quality, it is nothing. Students do not get ownership of their learning. University courses are again textbook based and are seriously lacking in resources.

Students can not choose the subjects they want to study. Subjects taken depend on 11th grade exam marks. Entry to medical, engineering, computer science and foreign relationship subjects require higher marks. It makes students, parents and teachers exam oriented rather than concerned with students' real learning. There is much corruption in order to get higher marks in examinations and entry to popular subjects at university. The quality of education is very low at all levels. Graduates are not properly trained to gain the skills required to do a job. Many graduates are unemployed. On the other hand, the military have set up their own medical and engineering universities for the students in the military circle. It is thought that these students are well trained and have opportunity to further their studies abroad whilst ordinary students receive a poor education.

3. Education of Refugees and Migrants in Thailand

There are 150,000 refugees living in nine refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border recognized by UNHCR. The refugees are mostly from Karen and Karenni states where there is frequent fighting between regime troops and ethnic armed groups. There are two million illegal immigrants living throughout Thailand outside the camps. The migrant population comes from different parts of Burma and enters Thailand illegally to look for work. There are also thousands of Burmese migrants living in neighboring Bangladesh and India. Since Thailand is facing a shortage of labor, illegal immigrants are allowed to apply for work permits to work in farms, factories, and sweatshops. About one million Burmese have applied for work permits, and it is believed that at least another one million are staying in Thailand illegally. The annual fee for a work permit is Baht 4,000 (USD

100). Many migrant workers with low paid jobs can not afford to pay the fees. In many cases, they have to pay more than Baht 4,000 for bribe. About 20 per cent of the refugee and migrant population are of school age children and are in need of education.

Refugee Schools

About 30,000 students are attending schools in refugee camps - from primary to senior secondary levels. There are about 1000 teachers. At the beginning of a school year, the number of students is higher because young people inside Burma cross the border and come into refugee camps seeking the opportunity to get an education. The Karenni ethnic armed opposition group (KNPP) controls schools in two Karenni refugee camps and Karen ethnic armed opposition group (KNU) controls the schools in seven Karen refugee camps with the support of NGOs. Curricula were drawn based on political and nationalist ideas. Teachers are recruited from the refugee population and they are not well qualified. Where native English speakers go to the camps and teach English, students' level of English is relatively higher than that of students inside Burma. However, the overall level of education does not show much improvement. One good thing is that almost all children in camps attend school. Because education is free in camps and parents get food rations, children do not need to work - or there is no place to work anyway. About 200 young people in camps complete their secondary education every year. Some 30 students from camps are selected to join an intensive college foundation course (ICFC) in Chiang Mai supported by OSI and have the opportunity to join higher education supported by scholarship. Other young people have no chance to continue their studies and some work as teachers or medics in camps.

Migrant Schools

Many Burmese migrants came into Thailand with their family and some are married in Thailand and produce children. These children need to attend school. Since the parents are working illegally in Thailand and children do not understand Thai, they cannot attend Thai schools. In theory, every school age child can go to a Thai school but, in practice, children are denied schooling because they are not Thai. Some Burmese communities in Thailand have created their own classrooms and teach children Burmese, Karen, English, Thai and Mathematics. Some parents want their children to attend schools where they are taught in Burmese or Karen to preserve their own language and culture. In the Mae Sot area alone (near the Burma border), there are about 40 schools (many are one-classroom schools) attended by 2,000 students. There are some schools in Mahachai area (near Bangkok) and Phuket Island. A few hundred children there get education in the migrant schools. These are children who are living near schools and their parents want to give them the opportunity to learn. There are many other children living at a distance from schools, with parents who move from place to place for their jobs, with parents who need their older children to earn money or to look after small children. Consequently, they have little opportunity to learn. Furthermore, the migrant workers themselves need education and training. Their old skills and disrupted education in Burma do not fit in the Thai economy. They need to learn more to improve their skills.

4. Education Programs in Exile

My colleagues and I started an education program along the Burma border in 2000. We met with community leaders, teachers and educators and learnt that there were enormous

needs for education of the younger generation in the regions: many children have no school; shortage of teachers; insufficient training; curriculum disputes, etc. Unable to provide for all of their needs, we decided to contribute our knowledge and skills by organizing teacher training and education seminars, and offering professional advice on curriculum development. Since the beginning of the program, my former supervisor Mary Wootten at the Center for International Studies in Education, University of Newcastle, UK helped us as to organize seminars and teacher training. The initial donor was OSI.

Teacher Education Program

The course covers the foundations of education including learning theories, curriculum rationale, philosophy of education, and history of education in Burma. We facilitate Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) workshops. Lesson planning and classroom management across the ability range are also included. Students also have opportunity to improve their study skills, IT skills and English proficiency. In the first few years, we recruited students from refugee camps who had completed secondary education and wished to become teachers. However, it became increasingly difficult for Burmese refugees to travel from their camps to Chiang Mai year by year, and we had to change the training model. We then recruited senior teachers with recognized leadership skills and evident dedication to educational work. We provide them with a foundation course, RWCT training and a train-the-trainers workshop. Following training, they become trainers and re-train other teachers at their own schools and near-by schools. Also, in collaboration with the NGOs working on education in refugee camps, we trained senior teachers and teacher-trainers from camps and they organized second generation training in nine refugee camps.

Since 2005, we also recruit senior teachers from inside Burma using the train-the-trainers model. Course graduates organize second generation training inside Burma. We also provide local RWCT workshops in Kachin State, northern Burma, and to migrant school teachers in Mae Sot, Phuket/Kho Lak and Mahachai. From the Chiang Mai training alone, **150 teachers** have completed training; from the second generation training about **1,000 teachers** completed the training (800 in refugee camps and 200 inside Burma); from the local RWCT workshops **200 teachers** completed the training (65 in Kachin, 100 in Mae Sot; 20 in Phuket and 15 in Mahachai). **In total, about 1,350 teachers received training** in our program and 40,000 students have been given opportunity to practice active participation and critical thinking learning strategies.

Training courses can be organized because of the commitment of my colleagues, volunteer trainers and international donors. Professors, lecturers and teachers from US, UK and Canada come to Thailand during their holidays and teach at our training as volunteers. Thanks to education charities and foundations including Prospect Burma UK, Pam Baker Foundation Hong Kong, Richard Hua Education Trust Singapore, Help without Borders Italy, Open Society Institute USA and individual donors, we have been able to continue our program for six years until today.

Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking

The Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) project is based on the idea that democratic practices in schools play an important role in the transition towards peaceful and thoughtful societies. Active in 30 countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Central

Asia, and more recently Latin America and South/East Asia, RWCT introduces research-based instructional methods to teachers and teacher educators. These methods are designed to help students think reflectively, take ownership for their personal learning, understand the logic of arguments, listen attentively, debate confidently, and become independent lifelong learners. The program can be used in all grades and subjects with existing curricula.

RWCT for Burmese teachers (RWCT Northern Thailand Project) was initiated as a part of the international RWCT program funded by the International Reading Association and the Open Society Institute in 2002. In the first year of RWCT workshops, international volunteers Jeannie Steele, Kurt Meredith, Karin Dahl and Terry McEachern came to Thailand to introduce RWCT methods. In the second year, the first generation participants organized workshops in three refugee camps. In 2004, IRA and OSI stopped their funding and we could not organize more workshops in camps. However, I was invited by Karen Education Project (KEP) supported by ZOA, a Dutch NGO, to provide training to its local trainers. I provided RWCT strategies and train-the-trainers workshops. In 2005 and 2006, the KEP trainers provided RWCT workshops in seven refugee camps. According to a recent report, 700+ teachers have received RWCT training with the KEP project.

RWCT is now disseminated not only in refugee camps but also inside Burma. In 2005, 15 teachers from Mandalay and Rangoon attended the RWCT training and education foundation courses in Chiang Mai, Thailand. In 2006, another 22 teachers who had some years of teaching experiences and leadership skills attended the training in Chiang Mai. Back in Burma, they now re-train other teachers. About 200 teachers inside Burma have completed RWCT workshops and are now using these strategies in their schools.

RWCT strategies are useful tools for classroom level educational change in Burmese schools. It changes the teacher's role in the classroom. A teacher becomes a thoughtful facilitator of students' learning rather than playing an authoritative role. The classroom is also changed to become a student learning community where students participate actively, practice critical thinking and gain ownership of their learning. The new strategies offer 'democratic experiences and practices' within the classrooms. It is intended not only for the personal development of individual students but also for the development of a better society.

Migrant Learning Center

A migrant learning center has been operating in Chiang Mai offering Thai language, English language and computer training for adult learners. Many Burmese migrant workers in Chiang Mai area have joined the classes. A course runs for three months (72 learning hours at school). A student who completes a basic course can join an intermediate or advanced course at the next three-month round. We started the Center in October 2005, and the third round is running at the time of writing this paper in July 2006. In each round about 200 students attended the courses. In total, about 500 migrant workers have completed one or two courses. We are also running a similar program in Pa Tong, Phuket Island for Burmese migrant workers there.

Life is difficult for people in Burma under the military regime. For ordinary people, it is not simple to pursue their education and to get a proper job. Many young Burmese come to Thailand looking for a job as well as looking for opportunity to continue their studies.

The learning center is a place where Burmese migrant workers can get a foundation in languages and IT to further their education and training. According to our records, the majority of our students are under 30 and most have completed lower secondary education while some have completed higher secondary level, and a few are university graduates. In Thailand, they have jobs in the night market, restaurants, factories, construction sites and domestic work. Some people do not mention their job and we do not ask any more. We are considering providing vocational training such as hotel and tourism, accounting, applied computer, wiring, painting etc. if they need skills in these areas. We also provide advice and information about universities, courses and scholarships for those who wish to study in higher education.

Primary School Project

We have built a school building for the children living in Yin Phan village in Wa State of Burma. There are 52 children learning at the school: 32 out of them are orphans and are living at the school. The children receive a rice ration from the UN World Food Program. WFP provides rice to Wa villagers and encourages them not to cultivate opium. The children themselves plant vegetables for their food. They also collect bamboo shoots and mushrooms in the forest. Thanks to the Pam Baker Foundation of Hong Kong that donates USD 9,000 for the school project.

I visited the school in the middle of August 2006 to meet the children and teachers. Wa children are like other children, they want to learn new things. I took some picture story books for them. They came around me and looked at the books interestingly. I taught them a mathematics lesson in a morning connecting with real world outside the classroom. They enjoyed the class. One of our TTBT students Lu Tawng and her husband are now teaching English, Mathematics, General Science and Social Subjects at the school. The school has three local Wa teachers teaching Wa language, Burmese language and agriculture. All teachers are semi volunteers without a proper salary. When the school receives donations, the teachers receive some honorarium. But they are committed to the education of their students.

It is a primary school up to fifth grade (Standard Four). Three girls have completed their primary education from that school. Two girls become the classroom assistants at the school and one girl was sent to May Myo inside Burma to pursue secondary education. We support her by paying for her books and school fees. In Yin Phan, there are no schools organized by the Burmese government or the Wa administration. But there is a Chinese school and students have to pay tuition fees. Pang San, the main city of Wa State, has a secondary school attended by 500 students using the Burmese school curriculum. Students have to pay for annual fee of Chinese Yuan 300 (USD 40). 20% of school annual income must go to the Wa government. The remaining 80% is used for teacher salaries and school running costs. Such is the policy of the Wa administration. I find it strange that the Wa government takes tax from school children while every other government in the world uses tax payers' money to pay for education. For our part, we can only offer tiny assistance for the education of 50 children in Wa State. I would like to support education of our younger generation on a larger scale - but must proceed step by step - not only humanitarian assistance but also education for all.

Wa State is naturally beautiful, but it is notorious for its opium trade and beheading tradition. Wa region used to be a communist controlled area before 1990, but the ordinary

people living in Wa State have been left far behind other parts of the world in terms of education and globalization. I see Wa people as world citizens, and we have responsibility to improve their standard of living. In reality, ordinary Wa people are stateless in their own territory – which means that they have no identity card to travel in Burma or China.

For Yin Phan Orphanage School, I would like to continue support for the school library, minimum school running costs and school income generation. Last year, the teachers were thinking to cultivate rice for children's food. Now that they receive a rice ration from the UN's WFP, they plan instead to plant tea around the school hill. The children will learn about a tea plantation and get some income after three years of cultivation.

Library

We have a small library with about 4,000 books. We collected the donated books from UK, USA, Australia, Malaysia, and Burma. The donors are volunteer teachers at our training (both teacher training and migrant learning center), students from Australia, an International School in Malaysia, Waterloo West High School in the USA and individual donors. The users are our students at the teacher training center and the migrant learning center. We also invite other Burmese living in Chiang Mai and local Thai people to use the library. The books are mostly on education, novels and story books for English learners. We will collect more books that our users are interested to read. We also encourage our teacher training students to set up libraries in their own schools. We intend to collect and donate children's books to these libraries.

We have introduced Sunday activities with our users in the style of a reading conference which we teach to our teacher training students. It works like this: everybody reads a book of their choice and shares it at the conference followed by questions and answers about the book. We found that students liked this approach since they could also listen to a further 20 books if there were, for example, 21 participants. We are now using this strategy with other library users every Sunday. Readers can contribute what they have read and benefit from the reading of others. We also invite guest speakers such as authors, poets and artists to contribute to our Sunday sessions. The first speaker was May Nyein, a well known author in Burma and a former university lecturer. On the 8th October 2006, she led a discussion under a title of 'Education Arts'.

5. Conclusion: Obstacles around Us and Our Way Ahead

We want to operate our program in our own country Burma. However, I myself cannot go back to Burma in the current political situation. My colleagues are in a similar position to me. Organizing a program in exile is not always easy. We do not receive official recognition by the Thai authorities since we are the opposition to the Burmese military regime. However, many thousands of Burmese people are living in Thailand due to political turmoil and economic hardship in Burma. Their children need to attend school. Adults also need to learn to improve their skills. If children are in school, we can protect them from being child soldiers, child laborers and victims of deadly diseases. The Thai economy can benefit from a well trained Burmese workforce. Therefore, we will continue our education program even though there are obstacles around us. When Burma is free for educational work, our program will move to Burma. Finally, we would like to request our Asian neighbors to help us in improving education both in Burma and in exile.

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