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## Issues Surrounding Curriculum Development in the Ethnic Nationality Areas of Burma

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### *Abstract*

*The paper mainly focuses on the curriculum development in the ethnic nationality areas of Burma. However, the study found that curriculum development alone could not solve the educational problems due to the fact that the majority of children had no proper education, the drop out rate is high and the quality of teaching is low. The paper provides findings of the studies on curricula, teaching methods and children's access to education in the ethnic nationality areas of Burma. It also reflects the suggestions of participants at the education conference held in Chiang Mai, Thailand in July 2002 organized by the Burmese National Health and Education Committee (exiled).*

### 1. Introduction

The data in this paper is extracted from the curriculum development project conducted by the Burmese National Health and Education Committee (NHEC) based on the Thai-Burma border. The data shows that curricula are varying among ethnic nationality areas. Furthermore, there is a divergent conception of the school curriculum between the regime and ethnic nationalities. 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 (Lwin, 2000). The study suggests that the new curriculum should be leading to multicultural education.

However, curriculum development alone cannot solve the educational problems in the ethnic nationality areas because the majority of children have no proper education at all. Teachers are not properly trained, and consequently the quality of teaching is low. The drop out rate is high, and only 1% of the students who enrol at primary school complete secondary education. Among particular groups, for instance, only 10% of Karenni children and 20% Karen children attend school. Shan children are among the most vulnerable and have a high level of illiteracy.

### 2. Curriculum Development

#### *Curriculum inside Burma*

It is expected that the Burmese regime uses education as a political tool preventing children from learning how to think. Youngsters are taught to be disciplined in and out

of school under the military regime. Primary schools provide Burmese, English and mathematics from Standard 0 (KG) to Standard II, and Burmese, English, mathematics, history and geography for Standard III and IV. Primary school curriculum is fact-oriented, overemphasizing preparation for secondary education rather than the mastery of basic skills, such as literacy, numeracy, hygiene, and thinking and reasoning skills, as its main objective. Science is introduced at Standard V. Burmese, English, mathematics, science, history and geography are taught from Standard V to VIII. There is no longer a science route and an arts route after the Standard VIII examination in 1993 (It was abolished in 1977, then reintroduced in 1985). Students learn both arts and science subjects at Standard IX and X. They are:

1. Burmese
2. English
3. Mathematics
4. Science (physics, chemistry and biology) and
5. Social (history, geography and economics).

Textbooks of mathematics and science for Standard IX and X are in English and the medium of instruction is both Burmese and English. This was introduced in 1991. Before 1991, all textbooks for Basic Education were in Burmese. Arts subjects are still in Burmese. Up to standard VIII, children learn in Burmese and English is taught as a subject. There is a big gap between Standard VIII and Standard IX for children who face higher-level subjects with textbooks in English. It is generally felt that too much of the basic education curriculum content is compressed into the two-year high school cycle. Teachers also face difficulties in teaching in English. Most teachers give explanations in Burmese, but pupils are required to read and write in English. Question papers are also in English. For Standard X examination students need to cover the courses for both Standard IX and X. It should be noted that there is no moral and spiritual education, design and technology and information technology. Art and sports are in some cases extra curricula activities. The secondary school curriculum does not achieve a proper balance between preparation for university and college and preparation for the work place.

In the academic year 2000-2001, the senior secondary school curriculum has 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 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 that has been 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 go on to higher education, the majority 90 per cent is not equipped for the world of work. One important problem linked with the present secondary school curriculum is 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 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 Ministry of Education, 1998, ch.1, p.10-11). The study, 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.

Primary level education is very important in that children need not only master literacy and numeracy skills, but also need to develop social and moral consciousness from an early age. However, the regime uses education as a political tool preventing children from learning how to think. Youngsters 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.

#### *Curricula in the ethnic nationality areas*

Curricula are varying in the different ethnic nationality areas. Primary schools in the Mon area use the curriculum written by the Mon Education Department. The Mon language and Mon history are taught up to middle school and high schools use the curriculum written by the regime. In the Karen area, schools use the curriculum written by the Karen Education Department. In the Karenni area, schools use textbooks in English, which are based on the regime's curriculum. The school run by the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) uses the regime's curriculum. In the Shan area, there is no proper curriculum but schools usually teach Shan language. Some schools in the Chin area use the Indian school curriculum. Many schools in the ethnic nationality areas do not want to use the curriculum written by the military regime.

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*, *Bayintnaung*, *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-manebayan*, hero *Ma-san*, wise man *Ba-yarn*, king *Yaza-darit* and hero *La-gon-ein*. Moreover, the Burmans and the Mon have conflicting views 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. (Lwin, 2000)

#### *Curriculum development project by NHEC*

The Burmese National Health and Education Committee (NHEC) has conducted local education discussions with teachers and educators from Myeik Tavoy, Mon, Karen, Karenni, Kachin and western part of Burma from December 2000 to April 2001. In September 2001, a seminar on curriculum development was held in Chiang Mai, attended by the heads of education and senior teachers of the different ethnic groups and some democratic organizations. Scholars from Norway, England, India, Philippines and Thailand also attended the seminar. An education conference was held in Chiang Mai from 3-5 July 2002 after the four education seminars on curriculum, teaching languages, children access to education, and teacher education. Policy makers, heads of education and senior teachers of ethnic and other democratic organizations attended the conference. The following resolutions were laid down at the conference:

#### *Resolution on curriculum development*

(1) Educators of the different ethnic and other democratic groups discuss curriculum issues and draw a new curriculum, which is flexible and has equal status for every area and suitable for the future federal union of Burma.

(2) The new curriculum should follow the following principles:

- To educate young people about the different kinds of bad dictatorship (this should be included in History syllabuses)
- To participate young people responsibly in the struggle to end dictatorship
- To live peacefully between different nationalities, young people should be educated about the bad side of chauvinism and narrow nationalism.

(3) School should provide a curriculum which:

- Is balanced and broadly based.
- Promotes young people with social, moral, cultural and physical development.
- Equips young people with the skills that are necessary for their adult life, as well as for the good of the local communities and the nation as a whole.
- Empower young people to take responsibility in the practice of democracy and

- building of federal union.
- Ensures peace and respects values of all ethnic nationalities in Burma.
- Includes human rights and environmental education.

(4) The new curriculum should be leading to multicultural education, which reflects the history, tradition and culture of all ethnic nationality groups.

(5) The new curriculum can be developed to meet local needs.

The resolution of the conference will be applications for the education policy of future Burma and a guideline for the practical work of the NHEC's education programmes.

### 3. Language Issues

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, once 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.

#### *The teaching of children's mother tongue at school*

During its local education discussions and seminars, NHEC has found the following:

- Indigenous vernacular languages are dominated by the Burmese language, which is an official medium of instruction at schools and some ethnic languages have almost disappeared.

- Education officials and teachers of ethnic nationality groups are willing to teach their own language at schools.
- Schools in Mon area, Mon language is taught from primary to seven standard. Mon language is the medium of instruction at all primary schools run by the New Mon State Party.
- Karen language is the medium of instruction at schools run by the Karen National Union from primary to seven standard. English is the medium of instruction from eight standard to ten standard.
- English is the medium of instruction at all primary and secondary schools run by the Karenni National Progressive Party. Karenni language is taught from primary to eight standard.
- Burmese language is the medium of instruction at schools in Kachin area and Kachin language is taught from primary to eight standard.
- In Chin area, Lai, Zo and Lai Zo local languages were taught at schools before the military coupe in 1962. These local languages were not allowed to be taught at schools under the military regime.
- Above mentioned schools teach three languages: ethnic language, Burmese and English.

*Resolution on teaching of children's mother tongue at school*

The following resolutions were laid down at the education conference held in July 2002 in Chiang Mai.

(1) All schools teach three languages:

- Children's mother tongue
- Burmese
- English

(2) For those children whose mother tongue is Burmese, they should learn one of the ethnic languages.

(3) In the ethnic nationality areas, the children's mother tongue should be the medium of instruction at primary level and it should be upgraded to lower and upper secondary levels.

(4) In teaching 'Burmese and English' in the ethnic nationality areas, the teaching method should be 'teaching Burmese and English for speakers of other languages.'

(5) When teaching other languages, teachers should use the respective language instruction.

(6) In a multi-ethnic area, local common language should be the medium of instruction in schools and teaching other minority languages should also be encouraged.

(7) Research on teaching languages should be conducted.

(8) Language teaching should be improved based on research findings.

Note: The conference agreed the above resolution having a record of Nang Kham Ing's comments. She is the representative of the Shan Culture and Education Committee.

*Nang Kham Ing's comments*

No.1, the word 'national language' should be used instead of 'Burmese'.

No.2, students should be taught another language, whatever one they are interested in apart from the three languages stated at No.1.

No.4, the word 'common language' should be used instead of 'Burmese'.

4. Teaching Methodology

The following situations are common in teaching methodology at schools in Burma including the ethnic nationality areas.

- Schools usually focus on teacher-centred teaching methods.
- Students participate in the classroom in a passive mechanistic way.
- Rote learning
- Shortage of teachers
- Lack of qualified teachers
- Teachers earn insufficient subsidy and support.

*Resolution on the development of teaching methods and teacher education*

The NHEC education conference has decided the following as a way to improve teaching methods and the teaching profession.

1. To provide 12 years of schooling as basic education.
2. To encourage children's active participation in their learning.
3. The proportion of the participation of teacher and students in teaching and learning should be as follows:

(a) Lower primary level	teacher 80%	student 20%
(b) Upper primary level	teacher 60%	student 40%
(c) Lower secondary level	teacher 50%	student 50%
(d) Upper secondary level	teacher 40%	student 60%
4. To use the teaching methods that allow children's 'critical thinking'. These methods will empower children for:
  - (a) active inquiry
  - (b) student-initiated learning
  - (c) problem solving
  - (d) critical thinking
  - (e) cooperative learning

- (f) writing and reading process
5. The following methods should be used to judge the students' performance.
- (a) Continuous assessment
  - (b) There should be a local or national exam at the end of the primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels to ensure equal status of students performance.
6. For teacher education and their rights, the following should be provided:
- (a) To recruit newly qualified teachers
  - (b) To provide pre-service training for new teachers
  - (c) To provide in-service training for the present teachers
  - (d) To support teaching aid materials
  - (e) To provide sufficient subsidy for all teachers
  - (f) To ensure that teachers participate in education policy debate
  - (g) To invite teachers to local education discussions
  - (h) Teachers have right to form a 'teacher union' freely

NHEC has launched both pre-service and in-service teacher training. The pre-service training provides subject knowledge and teaching methods. The in-service training provides teaching methods for 'Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking'. The RWCT methods are designed to help students think reflectively, take ownership for their personal learning, understanding the logic of arguments, listen attentively, debate confidently, and become independent, lifelong learners (Steel, J., Meredith, K. and Temple, C. 1998).

### 5. Children Access to Education

It was learnt from local teachers and educators that:

- Children in Burma have a little opportunity for their schooling. Especially, in the ethnic nationality areas where 20% of children attend school and 80% have no proper education.
- School drop out rate is too high. Only 1% of students who enrolled at the primary school completed secondary education.
- The reasons for children not attending school and dropping out at early age are mainly poverty, children need to help their parents for family income, poor health, shortage of schools and teachers, and unstable situation due to civil war.

#### *Resolution on children's opportunity to learn*

The following were agreed at the NHEC education conference to provide opportunity for children and their schooling:

1. To build more schools in stable areas
2. To provide opportunity for children in unstable areas



3. To provide classroom materials such as books, pencils etc.
4. To provide vocational education for young people who have not had proper schooling
5. To encourage orphans and disadvantaged children for their schooling
6. To organize street children and those who are not interested in education to join school
7. To encourage non-formal education for those who cannot join formal education
8. To support children with learning difficulties for their schooling
9. To take care of children's health
10. To promote education for girls
11. To provide free education until they complete basic education
12. To recruit newly qualified teachers
13. To promote quality of teaching
14. To support teachers to meet their basic needs
15. To encourage parents to participate in education discussions
16. Local authorities should support education

NHEC is planning a primary school project for displaced children in Shan State. Compared to other areas, children in Shan area are more vulnerable. Some displaced Karen and Karenni children can learn in the refugee camps. The cease-fire areas such as Mon and Kachin are more or less stable and children can go to school. Displaced Shans are not recognized as refugees in Thailand. Fighting takes place frequently in Shan areas and children have no choice but hiding in the forest. This situation makes many Shan children illiterates. The NHEC school project will benefit for 500 school-aged children of internally displaced persons in southern Shan State.

## 6. Education Research

NHEC is planning an education research programme for three years with the help of the Danish Burma Committee. The rationale behind the programme is that 'research findings will be used for education policy making, teaching and other educational development'. With the aim of producing quality research, NHEC will give intensive research methods training to teachers and educators of ethnic nationality groups of Burma. It was agreed at the NHEC education conference and the following resolutions were laid down at the conference to promote education research.

### *Resolution on education research*

1. To support education research.
2. Education research should be conducted in different geographical areas.
3. Education research should be conducted in different educational areas (such as survey, curriculum studies, language studies etc).
4. To follow research ethics.
5. Research study should be based on valid evidence.
6. Research findings should be reliable.
7. Research findings should be generalized.
8. Research findings should be used for education policy making, teaching and other

educational development.

9. Research findings should be discussed, read out and published.

Since Burma has a lack of research studies, this research project may empower teachers, educators and policy makers for their work on educational development.

## 7. Conclusion

The education team of NHEC is planning a three-year education project, targeting primary education. Aims include increasing the number of children in school (aiming at 50% of children in three years), curriculum development, teacher training, development of teaching of the children's mother tongues, and continuing research. Beyond this, Burmese young people need access to vocational and higher education. In Burma's long political stalemate, universities have not been open regularly and education has been severely disrupted. The resulting lack of knowledge and skills is threatening the future development of Burma, including its economic development. 'Education is vital for preparing us to be able to design our social system in the future' (Cynthia Maung, 2002).

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