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The state of education, pre-reform

Introduction

This chapter reviews the state of education in the decades preceding the 2010 elections, during which the country was primarily under military rule. It starts with a brief history of education in Myanmar and discusses it in the context of the post-independence military governments’ attempts to instil nationalism under the banner of a Bamar identity. The chapter considers the limited changes that took place between 2000 and 2012, including the rise of a parallel system of private education that provided an alternative for the urban middle classes, thus dividing society into those who could afford private offerings, and those dependent on what the state provided. The information here draws from interview and focus group data obtained from 19 Yangon schools in 2012, just prior to the start of the education reform process. It reflects the voices of teachers who were asked what they believed should be the priorities for education reform, and reveals the tension between the weighty curriculum and examination system in relation to the aim of improving teaching methods in the classroom – particularly the use of CCA to teaching and learning. The chapter then identifies some key challenges faced by teachers in the public education sector: very low teacher salaries; the related problem of tuition as a means for teachers to enhance their incomes; overly large teacher-to-student ratios, especially in primary schools, and even more so in rural and remote regions; the lack of classroom materials and teaching aids; and societal pressure on teachers not to marry so they can dedicate their life to their work. These challenges have made teaching an increasingly un-attractive profession. Thus, this chapter sets the scene for the social justice issues that the education reforms have promised to address, in order to understand how far the post-2012 changes have actually made a difference in the Myanmar government school classrooms.
History of education

The best known history of Myanmar’s traditional education before and during the colonial era is that of U Kaung’s detailed dissertation submitted to the University of London in 1920, and later published in the Journal of Burma Research (U Kaung, 1963). In it he describes how traditional Myanmar education functioned under the ancient monarchies, with mainly monastic settings serving boys, and a parallel system of lay schools developed to educate girls.¹ U Kaung identifies the influence of European missionaries who came to Myanmar over the centuries, and whose fortunes rose and waned, depending on which dynasty was in power and where in the country they were based. Missionaries shaped education in a lasting way in certain ethnic areas, more so than in the Bamar heartlands where monastic education held sway.

‘Modern’ education in Myanmar began with the British colonising Burma from 1824. In 1885, after the third Anglo–Burmese war when Burma was made part of British India, the state became responsible for education and a larger number of students, both girls and boys, were able to access some form of government education. Monastic education, perceived as traditional and backward by the colonisers, declined. According to Thein Lwin, the three types of school in pre-World War II Burma were as follows (Thein Lwin, 2000: 4–5):

- Vernacular schools, administered by local education authorities in which the medium of instruction was Burmese or one of the recognised local languages. These were the schools serving the majority of the country’s children.
- Anglo–vernacular schools in which English was taught as a second language and instruction was in both English and Burmese.
- English schools, in which the medium of instruction was English, with Burmese as the second language. These schools served the elites and were geared for students who aspired to government employment.

Because English was the language of the colonial powers, vernacular schools were seen as second class. A domestic reaction to the dominance of the colonial language took shape with the creation of national schools in the 1920s, where the language of instruction was Burmese and Buddhist holidays were observed as opposed to the British ones. These schools did not survive beyond the 1930s, however, nationalism in the form of anti-colonialism continued to grow across educational
institutions. In the early twentieth century, colleges and universities became centres of social and political activism, playing their part in the anti-colonial movement. By the 1920s, university students had begun to strike against the University Act Bill that established English as the medium of instruction and which set fees for instruction that placed universities out of reach of most Burmese (Zobrist and McCormick, 2017).

While the Japanese occupation was short lived (1942–5), the end of the colonial control of Burma resulted for the first time in a single schooling system with a unified curriculum and Burmese as the medium of instruction, making it accessible to all Burmese. It did not, however, result in a revival of the monastic education system. According to Salem-Gervais and Metro, ‘In spite of some government documents deeming religion essential to a “sound educational tradition”, and some policies leaning towards an increased role for the Sangha in schooling, a specific policy of religious teaching in schools was conspicuous by its absence.’ (Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012: 61). Thein Lwin reports that in 1947, the Education Reconstruction Committee, chaired by the Honourable Sir Htoon Aung Gyaw, reviewed Burma’s education system and proposed the concept of a homogenous system of schools provided and controlled by the state (Thein Lwin, 2000). On 1 June 1950, a new policy came into force promising free education for all pupils in state schools from primary to university level. Private schools were allowed in their own school buildings under the registration of the 1951 Private Schools Act. Shortly thereafter in 1952, a modern school curriculum was introduced nationwide, followed by textbooks in Burmese in all subjects. The curriculum for the state schools introduced vocational subjects according to local needs rather than a unified qualification system, resulting in an academic–vocational divide, an urban–rural divide, and inequality of opportunity between girls and boys (Thein Lwin, 2000: 9). In 1958, the Ministry of Education (MoE) announced that the medium of instruction was to be Burmese in schools and English was to be taught only from the Fifth Standard onwards (Union of Myanmar, 1992 cited in Thein Lwin, 2000). No consideration was given to the use of ethnic languages for pupils whose mother tongue was not Burmese. However, there were still private, Christian and Buddhist monastic schools functioning legally around the country, and private and Christian schools taught English from the beginning of primary education. In ethnic majority areas, community schools used ethnic languages. At university, Burmese also became the medium of instruction for all undergraduate subjects, with
English becoming the medium of instruction in postgraduate Honours and Masters classes (Thein Lwin, 2000: 8–9).

After the April 1962 coup led by General Ne Win, the Revolutionary Council proclaimed ‘The Burmese Way to Socialism’ as its political programme. The new government’s view of education was inspired by its socialist aims. ‘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’ (Thein Lwin, 2000: 9). The syllabus put more emphasis on vocational education to support the socialist cause. Universities also changed, with the new 1964 University Act decreasing the size of Rangoon and Mandalay Universities by splitting off specialist subject areas such as technology and medicine. Since the arts and humanities were seen as lower ranking courses, children with high matriculation results tended to study medicine regardless of whether they wanted to become doctors or not. In 1965, all schools were nationalised, including mission schools and schools operated for the Chinese and Indian communities (Zobrist and McCormick, 2017). In 1974, the military rule changed to a constitutional dictatorship (Silverstein, 1977) with Article 152 of the new 1974 Constitution stating that, ‘every citizen shall have the right to education’ and that ‘basic education’ would be compulsory, while Article 10 stated, ‘the State shall cultivate and promote the all-round physical, intellectual and moral development of youth’. However, very little changed across educational institutions. In 1988, as a result of nationwide protests in which students took a leading role, the 1974 Constitution was abolished and replaced by absolute military rule under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). General Saw Maung, the Head of State at the time, said that education was not the military regime’s responsibility, but would be that of the next elected government. Elections were held in 1990, but the military refused to recognise the NLD win, ultimately entrenching military rule for another two decades. The quality of education across schools and universities continued its slow and steady decline. Control by SLORC – renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997 – came to an end through the development of a new constitution in 2008, and subsequent 2010 elections that brought a partly civilian government into power in 2011. The new constitution that was enacted in 2008 made some changes to education. These are discussed in the next chapter.
Education and nationalism: Cementing military rule

The roots of 20th century Burmese nationalism lay in growing Burmese perceptions that they were second-class citizens in their own country, in British ‘divide and rule’ policies and the loss of traditional authority structures and in the exploitation by the British and other foreigners of Burma’s rich natural resources. (Herbert, 1991 cited in Thein Lwin, 2000: 1).

Education had been one means of developing and cementing nationalism from as far back as the colonial period, where the national schools and HEIs promoted anti-colonial patriotism. National schools had worked towards a return to pre-colonial education – as led historically by monasteries – coupled with new demands for civil liberties, prioritising Burmese language, literature and history. The National Education Committee that led this movement aimed for both progress and renewal: ‘Patriotism is the new religion of the new generation, and it is best propagated through National Schools’ (Cheesman, 2002: 53). According to Cheesman, students at national schools recited the Five Buddhist Precepts in place of ‘The Prayer for the King–Emperor’, were permitted to wear Burmese traditional clothes, and were free to read any publications (Cheesman, 2002). The national schools also reintroduced six letters of the Burmese alphabet that had been dropped from government schools. Unfortunately, problems with funding and factionalism led to their decline and eventual demise in the late 1930s.

From independence in 1948 onwards, the school curriculum was standardised and centrally determined by the government without regional or other special allowances. However, as seen earlier, private and ethnic alternatives were tolerated until the 1960s, just not as part of the state education narrative. After the 1962 coup, these alternatives were closed down and outlawed. Nationalism in Myanmar’s education system, no longer serving an anti-colonial purpose, had two main functions: to cement the Burman culture and language as central to the nation’s unity – a process referred to as ‘Burmanisation’ – and to help justify military rule.

Education and Burmanisation: Post-1962 focus

Burmanisation is the hallmark of post-1962 education. This was based on a belief that the country needed a unifying national identity based on one culture, one language and one religion. Since independence, there
had been conflict with separatist ethnic movements on the Thai and Chinese borders, with the Karen National Union (KNU) in particular calling for an independent Karen homeland. Further north, located in ethnic areas, the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) was fighting the Burmese central government. These conflicts provided the reasons both for the 1962 military coup (‘to prevent the disintegration of the nation’) as well as for the process of enforcing Burmanisation on all non-Bamar ethnic groups across the country.

It is important to note that Bamar-centred nationalism did not suddenly appear after 1962. Nationalism had been historically linked with the majority Bamar, both under the Bamar kings in pre-colonial and later during the anti-colonial pre-independence periods. Thant Myint-U and Michael Charney have described the formation of a ‘myanma’ identity centred around Buddhism, Burmese language and Burman ethnicity during the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885) (Thant Myint-U, 2001; Charney, 2006). Thant Myint-U argues that the concept of *myanma lu-myò* was consolidated around Burmese language, Buddhism and the political and legal institutions based in the Konbaung dynasty court at Ava during the late eighteenth century (Thant Myint-U, 2001: 88). This identity was spread by itinerant monks in what was later described as a process of ‘Burmanisation’, in which non-myanma people were given incentives or pressured to adopt myanma customs (Houtman, 1999). Because *lu-myò* was more flexible than twentieth-century conceptions of ethnicity, people could ‘become’ myanma by changing their political allegiance or behaviour – the category myanma was capable of retaining its purity while incorporating other groups (Charney, 2006: 41). As Thant Myint-U argues, ‘the strength and political dominance of a Burmese/Myanmar identity based on older Ava-based memories has never allowed the development of a newer identity which would incorporate the diverse peoples inhabiting the modern state’ (Thant Myint-U, 2001: 254). The 1930s nationalist *Dobáma* (‘We-báma’) organisation took as its slogan a series of phrases that can be translated as ‘Báma country, our country; báma literature, our literature; báma language, our language’ (Khin Yi, 1988: 5). Although this ‘Burmanisation’, as it was called, was primarily an attempt to combat the dominance of ‘foreign’ English and Hindi languages (Khin Yi, 1988: 6), it also served to exclude non-Burmese speaking ethnic groups from nationalists’ conception of báma/myanma (Metro, 2011: 47).

As shall be seen in later chapters, the conflict between ethnic armed groups and the Burmese military (‘Tatmadaw’) arose largely because of unequal rights as well as the forced assimilation process of ‘Burmanisation’,
best exemplified by the requirement that only the Bamar language was allowed as the language of instruction in schools and for official transactions. This excluded the culture and languages of over 100 ethnic groups that comprise modern Burma. In essence, though this was nothing new – the history of the Mon, Shan and Arakanese kingdoms were not part of the monastic curricula that dominated education for hundreds of years (Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012), nor do they appear in post-independence textbooks. As noted above, the tension between Bamar and other ethnic groups is undoubtedly ancient, and was deepened during the period immediately pre-independence when the Karen, Kachin and some other ethnic groups fought with the British against the Japanese–Burman alliance. In the post-independence era, the majority Bamar again instituted measures to control other ethnic groups. In fact, the primacy of one ethnicity (Bamar) over the others became a tactic the Tatmadaw used to attempt to legitimise itself through primary school textbooks. Cheesman found that according to the textbooks’ normative model, the ideal citizen had distinct ethnic (Bamar), religious (Buddhist) and gender (male) characteristics, and worked to benefit the state (Cheesman, 2002: iii). ‘Part of the aim of the textbooks was to instil an understanding of “the Union” that conflates the state, nation, territory and people’ (Cheesman, 2002: 1). After 1962, schools had to serve as an aid for the realisation of the revolutionary government’s socialist goal.

Under the SLORC/SPDC regime, the core aims of basic education remained unchanged from the preceding socialist period. Students were still expected to become citizens who served the state, with the aims being as follows (UNESCO–IBE, 2006/7):

- to enable every citizen of the Union of Myanmar to become a physical and mental worker well equipped with basic education, good health and moral character
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• to lay foundations for vocational education for the benefit of the Union of Myanmar
• to give precedence to the teaching of science capable of strengthening and developing productive forces
• to give precedence to the teaching of arts capable of preservation and development of culture, fine arts and literature of the state
• to lay a firm and sound educational foundation for the further pursuance of university education.

Buddhism, interestingly, was not included in the syllabus, rather it was part of co-curricular activities and teachers were encouraged by the state to develop their students’ spiritual character outside of school hours (Cheesman, 2002: 75). Cheesman recounts how Secretary One of the SPDC (Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt) personally travelled throughout the country in order to give instructions on how education should support the state and promote nationalism (Cheesman, 2002: 72–3). Addressing students of monastic schools, Khin Nyunt urged the trainee teachers to study:

… with the aim of being able to organize and lead the youths in safeguarding the nation against the danger of some foreign super powers who are disrupting national consolidation, peace and stability of the State and development, and to study with the aim of keeping national unity ever alive and flourishing of the Union Spirit, which are the true strengths to prevent the infiltration in political, economic and cultural sectors with the use of e-technologies, and to counterattack the fabrications of the neo-colonialists and their follower expatriates group. (New Light of Myanmar, 2001: 16)

Cheesman notes how such speeches exemplify the contradictions of the regime’s simultaneous focus on the ‘modern nation’ and ‘traditional values’ (Cheesman, 2002: 90–1). Part of a wider endeavour of promoting nationalism and restoring the glory of the dynastic era, the SPDC changed the official name of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 (Houtman, 1999: 48). Nationalism post-1988 changed focus in that the ‘Myanmar identity’ was now meant to include the other ethnic groups so that Myanmar means the Bamar plus other ethnic groups (although not ethnic Chinese or Indian). Houtman describes this process as ‘myanmaification’, the creation of a unitary myanma identity, which parallels the processes of Burmanisation carried out in earlier eras (Houtman, 1999). Callahan points out that myanmaification entails both
a simultaneous homogenisation and differentiation of ethnic identity: ethnic people are ‘infantilised’, mostly represented by traditional costumes and dance styles, with no mention of their cultures or history (Callahan, 2004). When looking at this process in the textbooks, Cheesman finds that Bamar people appear ‘natural’, whereas those of non-Bamar groups ‘are contrived and often comical’ (Cheesman, 2002: 157).

In line with Khin Nyunt’s sample speech above, the SPDC used school textbooks to reinforce links between the military regime and Myanmar’s past, creating the myth that the Bamar kings defeated ethnic minorities and ruled supreme. Metro shows that what she calls a ‘trinity of activities – national unification, economic development, and religious patronage’ are carried out by the SPDC and by all kings who are ‘hero-ised’ in the textbooks (Metro, 2011: 56). The result of this was to relegate anti-colonial nationalists to the second rung of heroes, behind the Great Kings. The prioritisation of the Great Kings’ meant that almost all of the history sections of history and geography textbooks were dedicated to Kings Anawratha, Kyansittha, Bayinnaung, Alaungpaya and Mindon. In textbooks, the actions of these Kings mirrored the actions of the SPDC, lending a spurious legitimacy to the military regime, a point developed by Metro (Metro, 2011). However, the kings and heroes of the other ethnic groups are only mentioned in relation to the Burman kings, so that the Mon, whose history is more closely related to the Burmans than other ethnic groups, received more textbook space than other ethnic historical figures.

In promoting the military as part of Myanmar’s history, the SPDC reduced the focus on the period of independence, in which General Aung San, seen by many as the founder of the Union, played a leading role. According to Salem-Gervais and Metro, it is a popular misconception that the SPDC erased Aung San from the textbooks (Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012). Rather, his role was reduced in light of the longer and wider history of historical kings, so that while in textbooks from the late 1970s he was often referred to as the ‘Architect of Independence’, and he appeared in numerous lessons, by the 1990s the process of downplaying Aung San’s role had occurred. According to the Democratic Voice of Burma (Naw Say Phaw, 2008), some extracts of his speeches were removed in 2008.

Though the focus on the kings was paramount, the role of the kings nevertheless changed according to what the regime in power was aiming to achieve. In the first chapter of her PhD dissertation ‘Myanma identity and the shifting value of the classical past: A case study of King Kyansittha in Burmese history textbooks, 1829–2010’, Metro argues that
Burmese history textbook discourse from the dynastic era to the present illustrates the ‘ethnification’ of Burmese (myanma) identity and shows that the SPDC was using the past to underpin its policies, which was not new, rather it continued a tradition that has been in use for two centuries (Metro, 2011). She argues, however, that the SPDC fails in constructing an all-inclusive Myanmar identity that includes other ethnic groups, rather the term Myanmar most often refers only to the Bamar majority, in effect erasing the other ethnic groups.

This argument is also underlined by Cheesman who explains that the Union of Myanmar – also called Pyidaunzu Myanmar Naingandaw – is essentially ‘Bamar’ (Cheesman, 2002: 226):

From start to finish, the textbooks link national identity with the dominant ethnic group. State rhetoric speaks to ‘Myanmar’ identity in terms of ‘national races’; in the textbooks this narrative is marginalised and subverted by a stream of text indicating the contrary. [...] Culture, tradition, history, civility and normalcy are all associated with being Bamar. But all of these things are also ‘Myanmar’. The lines are blurred: overtly, ‘Myanmar’ is ‘national races’, covertly it is Bamar. No better illustration for this exists than the fact that the language in which the readers are written, Burmese – with all its concomitant cultural and historical baggage – is signified as ‘Myanmar language, our language’.

Beyond promoting nationalism and the Union, the SPDC still had to ensure literacy and numeracy of the Myanmar citizens. As the quality of education declined, and unfavourable comparisons with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) started to emerge, the government began to develop a plan for the education sector.

Signing up to ‘Education for All’

In 2001, the MoE set up a 30-year-long Basic Education Plan that was to be implemented in six five-year phases. In addition, it formulated a special 4-year Education Development Plan from 2000–1 to 2003–4 to develop the education sector, specifically to improve enrolment rates, review the curriculum, revise the assessment system, establish multi-media classrooms and upgrade teacher training institutions (Government of Myanmar, 2004). The 30-year Education Plan contained 10 programmes for basic education with the purpose of promoting
greater access to, and quality of, basic education, and 36 programmes for the HE sector (Min Zaw Soe et al., 2017).

The Myanmar Government signed up to the objectives of the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), nevertheless education remained woefully underfunded, receiving only 0.5 per cent of the gross national product compared to an average of 2.7 per cent in other Southeast Asian Countries (Thein Lwin, 2000). In order to meet its EFA responsibilities, the government organised an EFA Forum in May 2002 and established the EFA National Plan for Action (NPA), adopting six national goals for EFA under the EFA NPA 2003–2015.\textsuperscript{10} The NPA was linked to the 30-year Long-Term Education Plan, and developed activity plans for access to and quality of basic education, Early Childhood Centres for Education (ECCE), non-formal and continuing education, and Education Management Information Systems (EMIS). The government set the following goals that were to be achieved through the implementation of the NPA with various government and non-government organisations (NGOs) working together:\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{itemize}
  \item ensuring that significant progress is achieved so that basic education of good quality is compulsory and completely free for all school-age children by 2015
  \item improving all aspects of the quality of basic education: teachers, education personnel and curriculum
  \item achieving significant improvement in the levels of functional literacy and continuing education by 2015
  \item ensuring that the learning needs of young people and adults are met through non-formal education, life-skills training and preventive education
  \item expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education and
  \item strengthening EMIS.
\end{itemize}

One of the flagship projects was ‘Child-Friendly Schools’, supported by the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF). For the wider community in meeting literacy goals, the focus was on Community Learning Centres (CLCs), and other non-formal education examples such as inclusive education initiatives. At the seventh EFA coordinators meeting in Bangkok in Thailand in October 2005, Myanmar presented slides that showed programmes for disabled children, over-aged students and the building of CLCs, as well as the introduction of human rights to the Myanmar School Curriculum.\textsuperscript{12} With regard to targeting
disadvantaged groups through non-formal education, unpublished MoE documents detailed how the CLCs that focused on literacy acquisition as of 1994, expanded from 7 centres established with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) assistance to over 70 centres in 11 townships. The CLCs rolled out a 3R (reading, writing and arithmetic) programme in rural and disadvantaged urban areas to support adults and help meet EFA literacy targets. The CLCs also served as community information and resource centres, building capacity with short-term courses and skills-based training. In addition, there was a special 3R programme developed for the border areas and implemented by the Ministry of the Progress of Border Areas and National Races (MPBND), Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Department of Educational Planning and Training (DEPT), with technical assistance from Department of Myanmar Education Research (DMER) that increased from 7 townships in Kokant, Wa, Eastern Kyaingtong and Rakhine in 1996 to 68 townships by 2007. Another measure was a special primary-level curriculum and syllabus for over-aged school children developed by DEPT in June 2003. The accelerated programme was intended to help children over 7 or 8 years old to complete primary education in two years.

It is unclear if the signing-up to the EFA goals shaped part of the 30-year policy or if what was prioritised in the 30-year policy was identified before the EFA framework. However, the policy plan of 2004 describes the details of the 30-year plan and they seem to show that the Government of Myanmar was aware of some severe shortcomings of its education system, particularly of issues related to social justice and equality. Long before the formulation of the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) in 2016, and eight years before the start of the reforms, the policy document engages with access to schools, mentioning in particular the border and conflict affected areas, gender disparity in schools, the lack of post-primary schools and the promotion of access to over-aged children. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and assessment that does not rely on rote learning and teacher education (both pre- and in-service) are also mentioned as priority areas for reform. In addition, the document provides details on changes that are required in HE, such as improving access, quality and delivering modern ICT. For example, Section 7.2 summarises priorities under the heading of ‘Developing Learner Maturity, Creativity, Analytical Skills and Ability to utilise Modern Technology’. The section on HE even suggests that HEIs should cater to the needs of the local communities and help develop the regions in which they are located. Although not as detailed as the NESP, this policy document is a valuable precursor. It seems that the issue the
MoE faced was more with the implementation of change rather than with the realisation that change was needed.

Myanmar’s progress was reviewed in 2010. In an unpublished advisory document to the MoE, a Myanmar consultant and education expert for the government states:

Net enrolment ratio in primary education in Myanmar was 65.7% in 1990. Though it rose sharply to 73.6% in 1995, it rose gradually to 77% in 2000. In 2005, 82.2% (about 1% per year) has been gained. In 2009, it was 84.1%. Hence, in order to accomplish the MDG target (95%) in 2015, it needs to increase, at least, by about 2% growth rate per year. In other words, more concerted efforts and investment are, indeed, required to achieve this target. (…)

The proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach grade 5, in 1990, was 24.5%. In 1995, it was improved by about 12% to 37.1%. Likewise, it was progressed by about 12% to 48.5% in 2000. While the increase rate of this proportion (12%) was doubled to gain 73.4% in 2005, it was only 74.4% in 2009. In other words, it had only increased by 1% over the period from 2005 to 2009. Therefore, this indicator is too slow to reach its target and Myanmar must invest all possible effort to achieve its target 90% by 2015 (pp. 2–3).

[…] The dropout rate in primary education is still existing in all the Grades. […] The highest number of dropout rates is in Grade 1, indicating 17.52% in 2001–02, 18.44% in 2000–01, 20.13% in 1999–00 and 23.17% in 1998–99 academic year.

It is clear from the above that the MoE was made aware of the shortcomings of its programmes well before the 2012 Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) and that they were aware of the challenges in catching up with other nations in the region.

**Child-Centred Approaches, international donors and the failure of a new method**

Part and parcel of the first round of education ‘reforms’ that followed the Myanmar government’s commitment to work towards EFA outcomes, was the introduction of a new teaching and learning method called Child-Centred Approaches (CCA). This was first introduced in cooperation with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 2004–5 to promote the development of children’s creativity, analytical skills,
critical thinking and problem-solving skills (JICA, 2013: 61). However, as shall be seen below, since the curriculum was developed before the CCA method was introduced, the two did not integrate well. Part of the problem was that the MoE published a syllabus rather than a comprehensive curriculum.

The Monthly Curriculum (MC) developed by the Regional Education Office (REO) and authorized by DBE is the well-known school syllabus despite being called ‘curriculum’. In addition to that, modifications relating to school curricula are made during an annual conference in April – the ‘Seminar on National Education Promotion’ – without updating the current curriculum documents. DBE merely notifies schools about decisions and modifications through Regional Education Offices (REO), District Education Offices (DEO) and Township Education Offices (TEO). (JICA, 2013: 61)

The problems of practicing CCA go beyond the mismatch between curriculum, syllabus, method and lack of communication noted by JICA. In a study in 2009–10 on teaching methods, most teachers who had received some form of CCA training had no difficulty explaining what they saw as the main elements of CCA or the benefits they experienced when using CCA. The teachers, however, struggled to apply this approach due to logistical problems such as high teacher-to-student ratios, lack of space, lack of teaching aids and lack of time. Teachers all agreed that CCA required a lot more work overall (Lall, 2010: 1–2).

A further issue with this change has been cultural; CCA has been perceived as a ‘foreign’ or ‘Western’ way to teach. Teachers were not always used to the self-reflection and collaborative procedures which underlie such teaching and were worried that they might be asked questions they would not be able to answer (Lall, 2010: 27). The issue of respect and how the students view teachers and parents or other elders remains central, as many see the main difficulty in balancing this new approach – seen as the ‘modern’ and ‘Western’ way – with traditional Myanmar culture. Parents were especially worried that children would become too disrespectful and reject the traditional hierarchies at home (Lall, 2010: 27).

Lall et al.’s study, conducted prior to the start of the reforms in 2012, focused on what teachers themselves had to say about the current education system in Myanmar and what education reforms they felt were needed. Some quotes from the teachers who took part are listed below (Lall et al., 2013: 18–19):
• ‘We don’t have time. Let me say. For biology we need 18 periods for teaching, 4 periods for practicals, so it is altogether 22 periods. But in practice I have only 21 periods for this month. […] We are in haste every month, we feel like changing it.’
• ‘To finish the course in time set by the MoE, CCA is used less than Teacher Centred Approach (TCA).’
• ‘But in our opinion we don’t think the current syllabus is fit for CCA. Not only children but also teachers prefer CCA but in the meanwhile a limit of time, lots of lessons to teach, examinations and the number of children more than we can manage are things hindering CCA to be successful in current Myanmar schools. […] With CCA we cannot assess each and every child thoroughly. We don’t have time. Current exam system does not go well with CCA. If we are to use CCA, we are obliged to reduce the curriculum.’

One of the main reasons that CCA could not be applied was incompatibility with the exam system, also referred to as the ‘Pass System’, used from Grade 1 to Grade 8. The intention of this system has been to make sure that the whole class passes the final exams with a basic understanding of each and every lesson. However, there were some constraints to exercising this principle. In the primary and high schools, teachers had to finish the given curriculum within a limited timeframe, and exams had to be held on target dates. Because of this time limitation, teachers chose some lessons out of the overall curriculum and taught the students through rote learning so that they would finish teaching the lessons on time and the students could then sit the exams.

The exam system included monthly exams, with questions designed in a manner that students only needed to memorise what had been taught in the classroom and to write down the exact answer. After the exams, the students’ pass rate was used as an indicator for both teacher and school evaluations. If students failed the exams, the teachers had to prepare reports to their respective Township Education Office/Officer (TEOs), and they had to teach the students again in the summer so that they could attempt the exam again and move on to the next grade. Most of the schools skipped this process and just allowed all students to pass in the first stage, otherwise the process consumed too much time and money – and some said they felt that students would not learn better anyway.

Other reasons for not applying CCA included insufficient teaching aids, inappropriate class sizes and large teacher-to-student ratios, small class spaces and out-dated curriculum in some subjects, especially science
subjects. There were also issues with regard to inequities between teachers’ qualifications and teachers’ salaries. Since older teachers had not received regular in-service training after entering into service, their understanding of teaching methodology and child psychology was not up to date; they were nevertheless the ‘senior’ teachers who had to be listened to.

Another issue that teachers complained about was their salary, the salary scheme for public servants pre-2012 being unrealistic. The need to subsidise teaching salaries meant that tuition became a popular business for teachers, especially in urban areas, to meet the costs of living. Unfortunately, the need to make money outside the classroom reduces teaching capacity in schools as well as creating conditions conducive to corruption. Students come to rely on tuition and only students who can afford tuition get high marks and high grades in exams. A deputy director from a TEO interviewed in 2012 added:

Most of the teachers do not want to change CCA. They think CCA is good, but there are some problems such as parents’ economic and education status, student-teacher ratio imbalance, time, curriculum, exam system, and teachers’ salaries. They think these factors make problems for CCA. In the current situation, they want to use TCA, not only CCA.

The fact that parents expect students to pass exams means that teachers also feel they have to teach to the test rather than for learning:

We have to spoon-feed here in our country. They have to learn by heart. We don’t have self-study, though children from international schools have self-study.

[...] We have to teach for exams, not to teach them so that they really learn! (Lall et al, 2013: 20).

It takes time, for CCA system is related with the intelligence of the children. There will be problems for this system because of our ‘all pass’ system. [...] We are weak in every sector in comparison with foreign countries. There should be music halls and sports halls for the children to cope with every aspect. The spacious classrooms and teaching aids should also be well installed. (Lall et al, 2013: 20)

In effect, teachers agreed that the whole system needed to be adapted to the teaching method. Just changing the method without changing the
exam system and without addressing issues of time and space would not lead to a successful adaptation of CCA. As one head teacher explained: ‘It is important to be provided with material resources together with system change. For example, to change into CCA we need enough teachers’ (Lall et al., 2013: 20).

The main findings of the research showed deep incompatibility between CCA and the exam system. The pass system meant that teachers were under time pressure to get through the curriculum, and the lack of space and time reduced their ability to use the CCA method. Capacity constraints both infrastructural and curriculum-related were the second issue, with oversized classes leading to inattention and rote learning methods, and a profession in need of greater professional pride and modernisation. Teachers did, however, speak of the pressure from head teachers to change the teaching method to accord with Myanmar’s education policy. The lack of parental involvement and the proliferation of tuition in the state sector resulted in profoundly inequitable outcomes for children, as children left school with different foundations depending on which school they attended. This then affected their ability to enter HE. In the end, those studying for the teaching profession were not the top achievers from the school system, in turn affecting teaching quality (Lall et al., 2013: 27).

The findings above, though based on research only across Yangon, are reflected in another, much larger UNICEF and University of York Institute for Effective Education Study (Hardman et al., 2012) that used a stratified sample of 800 schools from 20 townships covering a range of urban/rural, multi-grade/mono-grade settings and schools of different sizes. The schools had many of the traditional impediments noted in the earlier research (Hardman et al., 2012: 9).

Many of the teachers observed were working in an environment of genuine constraints caused by lack of adequate investment in school buildings: schools lacked electricity, learning resources and other facilities. Nearly 80% of the schools observed were multi-grade without walls or partitions between classes. Classrooms were often overcrowded, hot and noisy, with insufficient desks and chairs available and buildings were in a poor state of repair, particularly in rural areas.

The study used a pre-/post-test, quasi-experimental design to investigate the impact of an in-service and teacher education (INSET) programme on classroom processes and learning outcomes. The findings were
basically the same as noted in the Yangon study, in that teachers were unable to use the CCA method (Hardman et al., 2012: 9).

The majority of lessons observed used a transmission model of teaching in which the teacher often used a chalk board and/or textbook to transmit recipe knowledge for recall. There appeared to be very little difference in the underlying pedagogic approach used by teachers in the teaching of mathematics and Myanmar language at Grades 3 and 5. [...] Teacher feedback on responses did not occur in nearly 80 per cent of the questioning sequences as they were usually answered by a choral response with little opportunity for follow-up.

**Private schools: The middle class looks for alternatives**

Government schools and public education provision were increasingly seen as poor and inadequate, especially by the middle classes. Yet legally there were no alternatives. As had been mentioned earlier, in the post-independence period from 1948 to 1962 private education was accepted, but during the socialist era of 1962–1988 all private institutions were closed down. The Myanmar government website consulted in 2007 stated:

… though the private sector has not yet formally been granted a status of setting up Universities with privileges to confer degrees, it has increasingly played an important role in the education market in consonance with the adoption of market mechanisms in the country’s economy. The Private Tuition Law of 1964 permits setting up of private schools to teach single subjects per se. Permission is not granted to set up private schools to teach the full curriculum.

Dorothy Guyot describes how when the government shut down all universities in 1996 in reaction to the student boycott, families started to look for alternatives. This gap led to an opening for the private sector to start providing education services as a business, and even a school directory, the ‘Education Directory and Guide for Everyone’ (EDGE) which was published by U Myo Kyaw in 2000. Guyot wrote to U Myo Kyaw’s assistant Daw Tahnee Wade, who recollected:

Students would go from course to course at private tuition companies while they waited for universities to open. The problem
was that the education establishments were not allowed to advertise, so the students did not know what was out there for them. Many of the schools were legally illegal. They were not allowed to open by law, but the government of the time ignored them. I still do not know how we managed to get permission for the Education Directory, but I do remember going to the Censor office with a sample and getting permission. We were able to include adverts from the tuition centres and schools, and even had an ad from the British Council.

Many schools did not advertise themselves, and those that did used headings such as ‘tutors, foreign language schools/centres, or education services’. Preschools were the only private Myanmar schools that the government officially allowed, since education before kindergarten (KG) was under the authority of the Ministry of Social Welfare, not the MoE. The only schools that announced their presence in EDGE in 2000 were 10 international schools and 75 preschools. Slowly, the sector started to grow and by 2006–7, private schools had sprung up at pre-elementary, elementary, secondary and HE levels to cater for popular demand for English language, computing, accounting and business-related training. Some schools offered a wider curriculum, some focused only on a few subjects. Most operated as supplementary schools, where children came after their day at the government schools, others were full-time schools operating under the radar. Officially in 2006–7, private schools were still not allowed to operate as an alternative to the state system (although there were a few that had special status, such as the Yangon International School and the Diplomatic School in Yangon). The state tried to regulate these new schools by limiting the number of subjects they were allowed to teach, but schools managed to teach mathematics and science subjects under the guise of ‘Information Technology’ and other arts and language subjects under the title of ‘English’. Some private organisations, sometimes calling themselves schools and sometimes education centres, were also engaged in preparing students for examinations held by overseas universities and professional institutes.

Despite the regulations, some larger consortiums managed to set up large private education centres around the country. The International Language and Business Centre (ILBC) was such a venture and catered to a wide age group of learners of English and other subjects. The Khit Myanmar Weekly (2006) reports that there were also summer schools that ran as businesses, such as the Summit International Learning Centre in Yangon that focused on English skills as well as maths and sciences.
In the 2002 Education Directory section entitled ‘General Education’, the sub-headings were: Day Care (61), KG (17), Preschool (89), Primary (18), International Schools (11), GCE ‘O’ levels (20), Libraries (4), plus Basic Education Schools as well as Universities and Colleges (these last three categories were government institutions). It is clear from the listings that most private institutions catered to the pre-primary age (which includes both preschool and KG), nevertheless offering a variety of subjects such as Myanmar, English, Maths and general knowledge as well as singing, playing and drawing. In certain cases, other languages such as Mandarin Chinese were also on offer. The day-care centres/KGs catered to those aged 3–5, but some offered their services from the age of one. The prices for 2002 ranged from around 500 MMK per month to 30,000 MMK per month. The older the children, the more variety of subjects (including IT, Geography, History, Science, Arts and Physical Education) and the more expensive. The Montessori Children's house seemed at the time to be the most expensive pre-primary option at 45,000 MMK per month. Guyot et al. remember this as well (Guyoy et al., 2016):

The visible growth area was outside the purview of the Ministry of Education – preschools. The heads of preschools often quietly accommodated parents’ pleading to let their English language school grow with their children. An example of the quiet growth is ES4E (English Skills for Everyone), housed in a simple single story building on Kaba Aye Road. When Dorothy first visited the preschool in 2003 looking for a service placement site for Pre-Collegiate students, it had been teaching 3–5 year olds since 1998. When she dropped in a few years later its signboard and façade were unchanged, but in the back there were five new classrooms for five new grades.

Parents were keen to send their children to formal institutions, although the quality of tuition was not verified or regulated. An article from a local Burmese weekly (cited in Lall, 2009: 141), explains: 24

Private Schools ending with ‘School’ are chosen over those that end with ‘Centre’.

If the name ends with ‘school’, private schools are more likely to be chosen than if it ends with ‘centre’ said a principal of the private international school which opens in Yangon, Myanmar. The parents
choose this as it is related to the international private school field. In this field, more credible names end with ‘school’ rather than having a name ending with ‘centre’. According to the same principal over ninety per cent of parents did not check the credibility of the school. These parents send their children to what was perceived as popular schools.

What is clear from the above is that while the government schools were failing, urban middle class parents were looking for alternatives, and in light of the political changes expected after the 2008 Constitution had been enacted, the scene was set for a major overhaul of the education system.

**Tuition**

It is good to remember that all parents – not only middle class parents in urban areas – are key stakeholders in any education system. In Myanmar’s poorer households, parental involvement in education has been historically low, not because parents were not interested in education, but because traditional hierarchies accorded teachers considerable esteem and respect along with a belief that teachers know best and will do their best for the children. Parents of all classes and across all states and regions place a high value on education, which they connect with character development and socio-emotional skills, such as self-control, discipline, manners and ethics. At the same time, poorer households do not support schooling beyond the minimum amount thought necessary for their children, unless they perceive that the quality of education will allow their children to have a better future. The poorest households always have to appraise the school versus work choice for their children.

Parents at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century in Myanmar knew that the system was failing them and their families. Education was not a conduit out of poverty for the more disadvantaged, and it rarely offered a brighter future to those in remote and conflict-affected areas. Despite this, and possibly because there were no alternatives, parents and communities subsidised government education to about 70 per cent of total expenditure (Mehta et al., 2014). Historically, there have been two main forms of community-based funding of education: parental contributions and community-based donors. In the government schools, parents and children are regularly solicited to cover various common expenses of the school, including festivals, award
ceremonies and repairs. These contributions could be in cash, kind and labour, with individual households funding not just direct education expenses for their children attending the school, but also contributing frequently to fund the general expenses of the school. While officially ‘voluntary’, these contributions create equity issues between families, and in some cases create situations where the schools discriminate against families that cannot pay, potentially leading to student drop outs. It also means that already overburdened teachers have to focus on raising funds rather than focusing on teaching. The government had at one point imposed a blanket ban on parental donations, which in light of continuing funding gaps at the school proved unsustainable.

As parents realise that their children will not pass exams only by going to school, they pay for after-school tuition. This practice has mostly been illegal and for many years the government has tried to crack down on it. However, tuition remains in high demand because of the overcrowded curriculum that cannot be covered in class, an exam system that encourages memorisation, and large class sizes which make it impossible for teachers to provide individual attention to students. Parents also see tuition as an ‘investment’, making sure that their children get the best possible chance in life. One father in Mon State explained: ‘Some parents who are poor, and whose children are weak in studies, have to take loans in order to send their children for private tuition. It is a kind of investment for them.’ Also some parents reported that at times exam questions are revealed by the teachers to children taking tuition, giving those children an unfair advantage. In rural settings, parents sometimes find that they cannot help their children themselves. This is especially true for households where parents are either insufficiently educated or are unable to spare their work-day time to help the child after school with homework and lessons: ‘When our child is in a grade that is higher than I have studied, then I have to send them to a tutor who is more educated than me.’

Teachers of course also provide tuition to supplement their meagre incomes.

The nation’s more than 226,000 teachers, like other civil servants, are poorly paid. Public service salaries were drastically increased in January 2010; nevertheless, according to MOE data, a primary school teacher’s pay still averages only 47,000 kyat ($58) per month, a secondary school teacher’s pay averages 53,000 kyat ($66) per month and a high school teacher’s pay (upper secondary) averages 59,000 kyat ($73) per month. […] According to
interviews carried out in some of Myanmar’s border areas, the attrition rate of trained teachers is at times as high as 90 per cent. (Mehta et al., 2014: 85)

UNICEF’s Mon Situational Analysis (SITAN) study (Mehta et al., 2014) found that the use of after-school tutoring services has been the most significant form of non-formal education accessed by households. It has been used by families from all walks of life, rich and poor, urban and rural, students in all grades from grade one through primary and secondary school, for all subjects, no matter if these students go to ‘high’ or ‘low’ quality schools. The MoE has tried to ban public school teachers from providing private tuition, however, the ban seems to have simply driven the practice into a shadow market, where parents confirmed that they were still paying for the service, whilst teachers would not confirm they were providing tuition.

Most households worry about the future of their children, so knowing that it is the matriculation grade that will determine a child’s entrance to university and the subject that their child can study, parents invest in these supplementary classes, no matter what the government says. However, tuition in the end might compensate a little for those who can afford it, but ultimately it substitutes for rather than complements what happens in the classroom.31

**Conclusion**

It has been seen in this chapter that the quality of education in Myanmar has declined over the decades. Despite the government committing to the MDGs, EFA and publishing education development plans, these have remained theoretical documents, not resulting in much change on the ground. The presence of systemic bottlenecks at both the macro and micro level have created severe resource, capacity, information and incentive problems that in turn have weakened the ability of the education system in Myanmar to address the various deprivations and inequities experienced by children and school communities.32 There has been a large variation in the extent and mix of deprivations experienced across the different states, townships, schools, even across basic education grades. Overall, the presence of widespread poverty and a stagnant economy were key factors affecting education services and the experience of children within schools. The UNICEF funded SITAN study (Mehta et al., 2014) conducted and written before the reforms started, and
The State of Education, pre-reform

looking at the situation for children across Myanmar, summarises the issues as follows.

The immediate causal factors hampering children in Myanmar from realizing their right to education are the limited quality of education services and the high actual and opportunity costs of education. Quality is impaired by insufficient infrastructure, insufficient teachers, outdated teaching methodologies and large teacher-pupil ratios. Although no fees are levied in primary education, there are multiple charges that families must pay in order for their children to access it. This burden is heaviest for the poorest families. Tuition fees are charged for both middle and higher secondary schools. Nearly 30 per cent of school-aged children not attending school in 2009 did not do so because of the cost burden. Parents also have to consider the opportunity cost of keeping their children in education, both for themselves and their children; many feel work is a better option for them than education. Parents’ appreciation of the value of education and their willingness to support it for their children is strongly linked to their own educational experience (or lack of it). But even where children do attend school, parental involvement in their education is limited.

Underlying causes for the failure of children in Myanmar to realize their right to education include structural factors undermining service delivery, a lack of options in non-formal basic education and language barriers. The former includes lack of funding for the education sector as well as limited policy development and planning, limited quality of teacher training, sector-level management failings and inadequate monitoring and assessment. The current provision of non-formal or alternative primary education for children who have dropped out of school is very limited in coverage. Despite the country’s very complex linguistic diversity, Myanmar language is the sole language of government, public affairs and public education. The ‘language barrier’ is a significant factor for children from non-Myanmar ethnic groups dropping out of school. Three focus areas of education reform in Myanmar are quality, equity and sector capacity.

It became increasingly clear that government education needed a major overhaul.
Notes

1. It is interesting to note that even eminent western historians of Burma, such as John Furnivall, did not mention these lay schools. The reason for this was arguably because they focused on the education of girls and were not considered worthy of much notice.

2. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. See Tonkin for more on the 1990 elections, (Tonkin, 2007).

3. In the late 1980s and early 1990s as China withdrew its financial support, the BCP splintered into various ethno-nationalist EAOs.

4. More on this in Chapters 6 and 7.

5. More on this in Rose Metro’s thesis: ‘The rhetorical aspect of myanmafication was heralded by the “Adaptation of Expressions” law of 1989, which altered the name of the country in non-Burmese languages from “Burma” to “Myanmar,” ostensibly in order to correct the misapprehension of colonists who had labelled the country by its spoken name rather than by the more formal term by which it had been known since the dynastic era – myanma naing-ngan. The law also claimed that bama – what the British had rendered as “Burma” – was not and had never been a nation, but was instead one of the ethnic groups that made up myanma lu-myò (previous usages of myanma lu-myò to describe the majority ethnic group went unexplained)’ (Metro, 2011: 54).

6. In school textbooks, Nick Cheesman found, ‘People dressed as Bamar are seen as individuals or in family units, engaged in community celebrations or household tasks. Non-Bamar are usually lumped together in contrived groups displaying standardised national costumes, rather than simple day-to-day scenes’ (Cheesman, 2002: 157).


8. Any mention of Aung San would remind people of his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, held by the SPDC under house arrest at the time.

9. Metro traces the process of ‘ethnification’ of Burmese/myanma identity over the past two centuries by examining the continuities and changes in the way schoolbooks portray one king, Kyansittha (Metro, 2011). By investigating Kyansittha’s appearances in dynastic, colonial, nationalist and socialist era textbooks, she accounts for his transformation from a universal monarch in his own court inscriptions into a myanma king in current textbooks, in line with the military regime’s post-1988 project of ‘myanmafication’ (Houtman, 1999: 26–27) of Burmese identity.

10. See, for example, the Government of Myanmar’s (2014a) National EFA Review.

11. This includes a range of government organisations: The MoE leads the literacy programme along with the Myanmar Education Research Bureau (MERB), in 2004 re-named the Department of Myanmar Education Research (DMER); The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement; and the Ministry of Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs (MPBND). The Ministry of Information has established township libraries that are used as Community Learning Centres for Literacy and Continuing Education.

   NGOs: Myanmar Literacy Resource Centre (MLRC), Myanmar Women’s Affairs Federation (MWAF), Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association (MMCWA), and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). All are providing libraries, CLCs and reading circles for literacy and continuing education.

   International agencies: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNICEF both support literacy programmes and World Vision and Save the Children have assisted programmes that include literacy development.

12. One slide states: Human Rights Education was first introduced in school curriculum Grades 6–10.


16. This has to remain anonymous as this document was shared in confidence.
Anecdotal interview evidence over a decade shows that respondents do not necessarily know that CCA stands for child-centred approaches to teaching and learning. They do know, however, that it is the opposite of teachers lecturing to a class.

These were mostly government schoolteachers, although two monastic schools and one private school also took part in the study.

Tahnee Wade, personal email to Dorothy Guyot, 22 August 2016.

In January 2005, the author met a businessman who had set up a school which was teaching in English. The school was at primary level only and meant as a supplement to regular state school teaching after official classes had ended. The school was located in the businessman's house in a residential area in central Yangon. It emerged over the next few meetings with other education specialists that such schools were common, but that there was no official data as to how many there were and what they taught. Interviews revealed that many taught only English, but an increasing number of schools offered broader curricula, some even employing English-speaking foreigners on an unofficial basis. A visit around 6 months later revealed that there had been a ‘crackdown’ on such schools and that they were now only allowed to teach English and computers/IT. The government was also trying to regulate this new market by dictating what fees the providers could charge. It emerged from interviews that especially in secondary supplementary schools, under the heading ‘English’, a number of social sciences such as history were being taught, and that IT often meant maths and science. In this way, a fuller curriculum could be maintained. Official fees, of course, could be supplemented through black market cash payments (Lall, 2009).

This was common knowledge across the education community at the time but not spoken about. The proof came out much later in what Guyot et al. (2016) call the ‘President Thein Sein effect’.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>2011</th>
<th>2013</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Schools</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten, Primary, Secondary</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschools</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>188</td>
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<td>Total Private Schools</td>
<td>254</td>
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‘In just 2 years how could anyone transform small schools serving 3–5 year olds into full, multi-grade international schools? Look at the total number of schools. It increased by only four. Thus, the net disappearance of 31 preschools and the disappearance of 12 other schools may make up the bulk of the international school growth. We believe that many preschool owners had been quietly growing their schools for years, just the way ES4S had. […] Excitement was in the air about the forthcoming private school law. We suspect that the vast majority of owners of the 47 new international schools announced their school’s existence because they trusted that President Thein Sein’s government would welcome their efforts.’

Interview with Ko Tar, owner of one of the new private schools in 2005 and again in 2006.

‘International Language and Business Centre (ILBC) has classes in Taunggyi and Lashio (Shan States). According to the Managing Director, the ILBC, which has the most branches of private schools across the country and is based in Yangon, opened new branches in two cities, Taunggyi and Lashio in the Shan States. They will accept preschool students up to GCE ‘O’ for summer course and for regular classes. ILBC is the first among the private schools in Yangon and has three branches in Yangon (Bahan, Tarmawe and Thingangyun) with a total of 450 students (Khit Myanmar Weekly, 2006: 3).

For most of the 2000 institutions could not call themselves schools – however, some institutions did manage to circumvent government rules. (The Voice Weekly. (2007) Vol. 3, No. 30, 7 May 2007, 8). This article is not available online.

Over the past decade and a half, I have met with several thousand parents across the whole country.
Schools also solicit contributions from donors and ‘well-wishers’ whereby schools receive funding from better-off members within the local community through the institution of the School Board of Trustees.

See Bray et al. for more information on tuitions and the education shadow market (Bray et al., 2019).

Private subject tuition was investigated in the 2006–7 school year. This was announced on 9 May 2006 by No. 3 Basic Education Department under MoE. The township chief education officer was to instruct those providing tuition to apply to get permission to open the tuition class. The township chief education officer had to report the tuition classes which were eligible within the rules and regulations of the above department. If some problems occurred and if he did not report them, he had to take responsibility for all problems. The teachers from these tuition classes would be investigated too. If a school runs without permission, it would be terminated in accordance with the law of 1984 Rules and Regulation of Private Subject Tuition. (Living Color Magazine. 2006 ‘Private subject tuition investigated’, 132 (July), 18).

Author’s notes, interview with Rural Mothers, Mawlamyine, 2013.

‘Order banning private tuition is “not fair”’. Eleven Media, 14 October 2013 reported that the: ‘Ministry of Education has issued an order to teachers not to give private tutoring but the directive doesn’t seem to have much effect as the practice continues unabated.’ https://www.nationthailand.com/noname/30217080.

Concerns that this system creates incentives for teachers to shirk their primary teaching responsibilities within school hours have led MoE to ban the supply of tuition by public school teachers. The ban, however, proved to be both unsustainable and counter-productive – driving the practice into the shadowmarket and making it even more difficult for poorer children to access after-school support.

Conclusion drawn by Mehta et al.’s 2014 UNICEF-funded Mon SITAN study. This conclusion can be drawn for the whole country at the time.

Mehta et al.’s 2014 study conducted for UNICEF also points to the following disparities that will be explored in more depth in the next chapter. Primary schooling Disparities exist: in terms of regions […] Tanintharyi (98 per cent) had the highest rate of primary education participation and Rakhine (75.8 per cent) the lowest; there was a slight bias towards urban schooling – 93 per cent compared with 89.2 per cent in rural schools; it was much higher for children from the richest quintile (94.9 per cent) than those from the poorest (81.4 per cent). Enrolment of disabled children is particularly low. Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Ministry of Health and UNICEF (2011) 80: ‘[…] Despite official whole township enrolment drives undertaken since 1999–2000, the MICS 2009–10 data show that only 77.3 per cent of 5 year olds attended school. This increased to 95 per cent for 7 and 8 year olds. Given the 117 per cent gross enrolment rate in primary education in 2008 and that 11.9 per cent of children aged 10–15 in 2009–10 were attending primary school, these figures indicate that many over-aged children are enrolled in primary education. Again, there are significant disparities. As much as 19 per cent of 10–15-year-old children from the poorest households were still in primary school, but only 5 per cent from the richest. The rich–poor contrast is more marked when the status of 9 year olds is assessed: only 31.2 per cent of 9 year olds from the poorest households were in the last year of primary school, compared with 78.7 per cent of those from the richest. Regional disparities are prominent: just 31.7 per cent of 9 year olds were in the last year of primary school in Rakhine State, compared with 72.3 per cent in Tanintharyi, and UNICEF (Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Ministry of Health and UNICEF, 2011: 80–1) ‘[…] Despite official whole township enrolment drives undertaken since 1999–2000, the MICS 2009–10 data show that only 77.3 per cent of 5 year olds attended school. This increased to 95 per cent for 7 and 8 year olds. Given the 117 per cent gross enrolment rate in primary education in 2008 and that 11.9 per cent of children aged 10–15 in 2009–10 were attending primary school, these figures indicate that many over-aged children are enrolled in primary education. Again, there are significant disparities. As much as 19 per cent of 10–15-year-old children from the poorest households were still in primary school, but only 5 per cent from the richest. The rich–poor contrast is more marked when the status of 9 year olds is assessed: only 31.2 per cent of 9 year olds from the poorest households were in the last year of primary school, compared with 78.7 per cent of those from the richest. Regional disparities are prominent: just 31.7 per cent of 9 year olds were in the last year of primary school in Rakhine State, compared with 72.3 per cent in Tanintharyi, and UNICEF (Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Ministry of Health and UNICEF, 2011: 80–1) ‘[…] Despite official whole township enrolment drives undertaken since 1999–2000, the MICS 2009–10 data show that only 77.3 per cent of 5 year olds attended school. This increased to 95 per cent for 7 and 8 year olds. Given the 117 per cent gross enrolment rate in primary education in 2008 and that 11.9 per cent of children aged 10–15 in 2009–10 were attending primary school, these figures indicate that many over-aged children are enrolled in primary education. Again, there are significant disparities. As much as 19 per cent of 10–15-year-old children from the poorest households were still in primary school, but only 5 per cent from the richest. The rich–poor contrast is more marked when the status of 9 year olds is assessed: only 31.2 per cent of 9 year olds from the poorest households were in the last year of primary school, compared with 78.7 per cent of those from the richest. Regional disparities are prominent: just 31.7 per cent of 9 year olds were in the last year of primary school in Rakhine State, compared with 72.3 per cent in Tanintharyi, and UNICEF (Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, Ministry of Health and UNICEF, 2011: 81). Secondary schooling Participation rates in secondary education are increasing but still low and inequitable. The gross enrolment rate for secondary education was estimated to be 53 per cent in 2008, a significant increase from 34 per cent in 1999. (Global Education and Monitoring Report Team, 2011: 82–3.) ‘[…] The recent MICS also found that the rural–urban difference
in secondary school attendance (76 per cent versus 52 per cent) was far more pronounced than for primary school attendance. So too were the disparities based on socio-economic status: only 28.2 per cent of children from the poorest households were in secondary school, compared with 85.5 per cent from the richest households. Regional disparities were also greater (figure 29): the secondary school attendance rate was 74.7 per cent in Yangon but only 30.9 per cent in Rakhine, low rates were also found in Shan State.'