Education and Democracy in Burma:
Decentralization and Classroom-Level Educational Reform

July 10, 2007

Dr. Thein Lwin
Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to the International Forum for Democratic Studies, National Endowment for Democracy for awarding me a fellowship allowing me to conduct my research study. My heartfelt thanks go to the Director of the Fellowship Program, Dr. Sally Blair and her colleagues, Maria Fleetwood, Zerxes Spencer, Melissa Aten, Alex Bloom, Jessica Martin, Ryan White and Elizabeth Wittke for their guidance and assistance with my research.

I wish to express particular gratitude to Brian Joseph and his South and Southeast Asia team for their encouragement and support. Additionally, my sincere thanks and appreciation to all NED staff members who took time to explain education in the United States for me.

My thanks also to Allen Overland, Tim Myers and their colleagues at the Democracy Resource Center for providing books, articles and other education related materials relevant to my research. I also thank my peers – the other Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellows - for their views, ideas and encouragements. I wish to extend my thanks to those who provided lectures, seminars, presentation and roundtable discussions during my fellowship period, from which I have learnt a great deal.

I would also like to express my thanks to the following head-teachers, teachers, professors and officers who allowed me to visit their offices, schools, universities and answered my research questions – John Fiegel, Director of Parental Options and Information and Jim Houser, Director of the Charter School Facility Program at the US Department of Education; John Hoffman, Washington Jesuit Academy Private Catholic School; Prof. Raja Nasr, Prof. Ana Lado, Prof. Shelly Haser, and Prof. Kristi Johnson at the School of Education and Human Services, Marymount University in Virginia; Josephine Baker, District of Columbia Public Charter School Board; Marjorie Myers, Francis Scott Key Elementary School (Arlington Public Schools); The head-teacher, Barcroft Elementary School, Arlington, Virginia; Eric Westendorf, E.L.Haynes Public Charter School, Washington DC; Gregory Meece, Newark Charter School; Joan Devlin, and Alice Gill, American Federation of Teachers; Asha Mathur , Murch Elementary School in Washington D.C.; Professor Herve Varenne and Prof. Lesley Bartlett at the Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.

I would also like to express my thanks to Dr. Sein Win, elected Prime Minister of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, U Lian Uk, elected MP in 1990 election, Maung Swan Yi, Burmese poet, Dr. Aung Khin, Burmese American Democratic Alliance and my Burmese friends who attended the roundtable discussion on ‘education and democracy in Burma’ at the NED office on June 11, 2007 and provided their comments and suggestions.

In addition, my deepest thanks to Mary and Steve Wootten, and Nan Lung, University of Newcastle UK, Prof. Kurt Meredith, University of Northern Iowa, Priscilla Clapp, Ex. Charge d’Affairs, US Embassy in Rangoon, and my research associate Alex Bloom for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. However, any errors of judgment and interpretation remain my responsibility.

And, last but not least, I want to give my thanks to my colleagues in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Burma, who have managed the Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers and Migrant Learning Center while I have been away for my research.

Education and Democracy in Burma:
Decentralization and Classroom-Level Educational Reform

July 10, 2007

Thein Lwin[1]
Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow

Abstract

In the last sixty years, Burma has experienced several periods of political upheaval, each of which has impacted on the country's educational system. The first transition in 1948 was from colonial to national education, and the second, following the 1962 military coup, was from national to 'socialist' education. In this paper, I will address these periods of educational change and, anticipating Burma's eventual transition to democracy, will suggest a plan to decentralize the educational system from classroom through to national level. I will draw from my seven years of educational work for displaced Burmese young people along the Thai-Burma border, and from my current research on education in democracy. I will also discuss strategies for promoting educational reform and strengthening cultural and national identity within the context of a democratic transition in a multi-ethnic society.

Summary

"Democracy cannot move forward in Burma without education reform. I suggest a decentralized education system from national to classroom level. We will promote 'thinking classrooms' to encourage young people to become democratic citizens. We will launch universal, compulsory nine-year education all over Burma. We will provide training and professional development for teachers to ensure quality education and to build local capacity, which will meet immediate national needs."

[1] **Dr. Thein Lwin** is director of the Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers, a nonprofit educational organization that seeks to transform the quality of education in Burma through ongoing countrywide teacher training programs (www.educationburma.net). Dr. Lwin holds a doctorate in education from the University of Newcastle, UK. He is currently working on educational reform within the context of political transitions, focusing on the role of classroom-level instruction in facilitating democratic change in Burma.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on democratic educational change[2] in a Burmese context. Currently a military dictatorship, Burma can be expected to return to democracy. This study is intended to make a contribution to the theory and practice of educational change in a transitional period. The author has made a study of two educational changes in Burma. One is the change from colonial education to national education during the country's transition to independence in 1948. The second is from national education to so-called 'socialist' education in the period following the military coup of 1962 (Thein Lwin, 2003). Both educational changes were highly centralized and linked with social and political changes in the country. This study will focus on how change can be approached and achieved in a transition to democracy. Political turmoil has existed since 1988 and the country's education is without direction. Therefore, this study hopes to inform educators and policymakers by suggesting a democratic route to educational change supporting Burma's political change.

I have been involved in educational work for displaced Burmese young people on the Thai-Burma border for seven years. I am now a Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow at the International Forum for Democratic Studies, National Endowment for Democracy. During my fellowship period, I have attended a series of lectures, democracy seminars, and roundtable discussions at the NED and other organizations. I visited seven schools, interviewed teachers and observed in classrooms. I also visited two teacher training institutions, the American Federation of Teachers and two government offices to meet people in order to gain a clearer understanding of education in American democracy. Information technology is very helpful to search documents and articles related to my study. These studies shaped my idea to analyze Burmese education and to provide suggestions for democratic educational change in Burma.

However, there is a wide gap between Burmese and American education – American teachers are well qualified whilst Burmese teachers are not; American students actively participate in their lessons whilst Burmese students are passive; the US government allocates $18,000 per year for a student while the Burmese government's spending is estimated at less than $18 per year[3]. I am aware that I should not present a photo copy of American education as a model for Burma in the transitional period.

On the June 11, 2007 the International Forum for Democratic Studies organized a roundtable discussion attended by more than 30 Burmese who are the promoters of democracy in Burma including Dr. Sein Win of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, U Lian Uk, an elected MP from Chin State and Maung Swan Yi, a well known Burmese poet. We discussed the concept of introducing a decentralized education system in Burma from the classroom through to national policy, including consideration of minority languages in education reform. In the discussion, I received valuable comments and suggestions for successful educational change. I am also aware of the potential barriers and challenges in the process of educational reform.

---

[2] Democratic educational change refers to the idea of wider involvement of all stakeholders including pupils, parents, teachers, policy makers, and employers in generating and developing curriculum and classroom practice; and an educational approach that, through encouraging active learning and critical thinking, as well as developing skills, knowledge and understanding, might better prepare young people for a democratic future.

[3] Educational spending was less than 1.2% of total government expenditure in 1995 (sources: www.nationmaster.com; www.aphead.org.au/) Educational spending is 0.4%, health spending is 0.5% while military spending is 40% in 2007 (source: www.burmadigest.org.uk June 24, 2007)

In this paper, the discussion mainly focuses on Primary and Secondary level education. It does not discuss higher education, vocational education, adult education and early childhood education, all of which require further study to prepare for comprehensive educational reform in Burma. This study only discusses normal classrooms rather than Special Educational Needs and education for gifted children. These areas will be studied by my colleagues.

In the following paragraphs I will provide some background of education in Burma, in the ethnic minority areas controlled by armed opposition groups, in the refugee camps, and at the Burmese migrant schools in Thailand. I have written a history of Burmese education from 1945 to 2000. That paper, which provides detailed analysis of the education system, curriculum and related educational issues, can be viewed on the website, www.educationburma.net/. I will also discuss the historical context of educational reform in 1948 and 1962. I will seek to draw lessons from educational practice in the United States. I will then provide implications for Burma followed by recommendations. During my discussion, I will highlight the importance of classroom-level educational change in the period of democratic transition.

My fellowship research is funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which receives funding from the US Congress through a grant from the Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. However, all the opinions expressed in this paper are my own and do not reflect the view of NED or any other organization.

2. Current Educational Situation in Burma

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

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

2.1 Public Schools

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

2.2 Monastic Education

Thanks to Buddhist monks, children who never enrolled in secular schools can still learn the three R's in monasteries. These children learn reading, writing, math, sciences, history and geography as well as Buddhism. Monastic schools are officially allowed to provide primary education by the regime under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Some monastic schools have expressed interest in expending to the secondary level. However, the government announced recently that monastic schools must not provide education beyond the fifth grade. Only two monastic schools, one in Mandalay and one in Rangoon are permitted to provide secondary education. It is likely that monastic schools are supported by Buddhist communities and the regime does not need to use its budget. However, other religious communities - such as Christian and Muslim - are not allowed to open schools aside from a few Christian organizations running schools in the ceasefire regions. For example, Kachin Baptist Church (KBC) is operating schools in Kachin State. Regarding the schools run by religious organizations, it would be difficult for the children of other religious communities to send their children to a school run by another religion.

Monastic School, Thanlyin 2006

2.3 Private Schools

There are some private schools operating in the city of Rangoon. Since children do not receive quality education in the public schools, parents want to send their children to private schools with qualified local and western teachers. School fees are high and only the ruling class and wealthy people can send their children to such schools. There are huge discrepancies between the children of different social classes in pursuing their education. The private schools mostly focus on mastery of the English language. Parents

want their children to speak good English - hoping that they will send their children to the English speaking countries to work or to continue their studies.

2.4 Higher Education

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

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

3. Education of Refugees and Migrants in Thailand

Mae Khong Kha Refugee Camp, 2003

There are 150,000 refugees living in nine refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border recognized by UNHCR. The refugees are mostly from Karen and Karenni states where there is frequent fighting between regime troops and armed ethnic groups. There are two million illegal immigrants living throughout Thailand outside the camps. The migrant population comes from different parts of Burma and enters Thailand illegally to look for work. There are also thousands of Burmese migrants living in neighboring Bangladesh and India. Because, Thailand is facing a shortage of labor, illegal immigrants are allowed to apply for work permits to work in farms, factories, and sweatshops. Approximately one million Burmese have applied for work permits, and it is believed that at least another one million are staying in Thailand illegally. The annual fee for a work permit is Baht 4,000 (USD 100). Many migrant workers with low paid jobs can not afford to pay the fees. In many cases, they have to pay more than Baht 4,000 in bribes. About 20% of the refugee and migrant population are of school age and in need of education.

3.1 Refugee Schools

Currently about 30,000 students are attending schools in refugee camps - from primary to senior secondary levels. There are about 1000 teachers. At the beginning of a school year, the number of students is higher because young people inside Burma cross the border and come into refugee camps seeking the opportunity to get an education. The Karenni ethnic armed opposition group (KNPP) controls schools in two Karenni refugee camps and the Karen ethnic armed opposition group (KNU) controls the schools in seven Karen refugee camps with the support of NGOs. Curricula were drawn based on political and nationalist ideas. Teachers are recruited from the refugee population and they are not well qualified. Where native English speakers go to the camps and teach English, students' level of English is relatively higher than that of students inside Burma. However, the overall level of education does not show much improvement. One positive aspect of refugee camp education is that almost all children in camps attend school. Because education is free in camps and parents get food rations, children do not need to work - or there is no place to work anyway. About 200 young people in camps complete their secondary education every year. Some 20 students from camps are selected to join an intensive college foundation course (ICFC) in Chiang Mai, Thailand supported by OSI and have the opportunity to join higher education supported by scholarship. A few of other students came out from camps and attended training such as human rights or media in Chiang Mai or Mae Sot, Thailand. Other young people have no chance to continue their studies and some work as teachers or medics in camps.

A Refugee School on the Border, 2000

3.2 Migrant Schools

Migrant Learning Center, Chiang Mai, 2007

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

4. Education in the Ethnic Nationality Areas

4.1 Kachin

Teacher Training at Mai Ja Yan, Kachin State, 2004

Education in the ethnic nationality areas is worse than in central Burma. Because of civil war, these areas are not stable and schooling of young people is frequently interrupted. According to a Kachin educator working for Kachin Independent Organization (KIO), they built their own schools in the KIO controlled area; the schools were burned down when the Burmese government troops attacked them. After the ceasefire agreement between the government and KIO in 1995, they re-built the schools. I have visited Kachin area three times and provided training to teachers and organized seminars with the Kachin education officers and head teachers. Kachin students are allowed to sit government exams in the last year of their secondary education. Therefore, Kachin schools use the government school curriculum, although they are not happy to use it, which is considered as Burmanization. The medium of instruction is both Kachin and Burmese. Kachin language is one of the major subjects at the KIO schools. Only a few students pass the government examinations. One of the reasons is language – Kachin students do not perform well in Burmese.

4.2 Mon

A Primary School in Mon State, 2000

Students attending schools operated by the New Mon State Party (NMSP) are in a similar situation to KIO students. The NMSP made a ceasefire agreement before the KIO. Mon educators do not want to use the Burmese government school curriculum - especially history textbooks. The Burmese government and the NMSP have conflicting views on history in that those who are considered as heroes on the Burmese side are seen as invaders on the Mon side following the occupation of the latter by the former (Thein Lwin, 2000). In fact, NMSP schools teach about Mon kings and heroes while the government schools teach Burmese kings and heroes. The result is that Mon students who take government exams have difficulties providing answers.

4.3 Wa

A Wa Girl at the Orphanage School in Yin Phan, 2006

Wa is also a ceasefire region. Wa children have little opportunity to get schooling, and are far more likely to become child soldiers or drug addicts. I have visited the Wa region twice, in 2004 and 2006, and understand the educational situation there. My organization (TTBT) supports a Wa school in Yin Phan Township. In Yin Phan, there are no schools

organized by the Burmese government nor by the Wa administration, but there is a Chinese school where students have to pay tuition fees. In Pang San, the main city of Wa State has a secondary school attended by 500 students using the Burmese school curriculum. Students need to pay an annual fee of Chinese Yuan 300 (USD 40). 20% of the school's annual income is taken by the Wa government. The remaining of 80% is used for teachers' salaries and school running costs. According to a Wa community leader, that is the policy of the Wa administration. It seems strange that the Wa government takes tax from school children.

4.4 Shan

Shan Teachers Attend the 'Thinking Classroom' Workshop, 2006

The educational situation in the remote areas of Shan State is also bad. Children get education at the Shan Buddhist monasteries. The Shan Women Action Network (SWAN) is now trying to provide primary education in the border region and a youth education program in Chiang Mai. Many young people from those areas attend the migrant learning center in Chiang Mai which I organized. I found that they had only one or two years of schooling and they do not understand Burmese or English. Shan nationalists discourage Shan people from speaking Burmese. The young Shan people in the above picture were attending a 120-hour teacher training entitled 'Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking' at my school. They got schooling inside Burma and completed an English, Computer and Social Studies course at the school organized by SWAN in Chiang Mai. They have now decided to work as teachers in the remote areas of Shan State.

4.5 Karen and Karenni

Karen and Karenni young people get more opportunity to get education in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border than other ethnic groups. As stated above (see: section 3.1) the Karen Education Department and the Karenni Education Department design their own curriculum and operate their own schools with their own priorities and values. These schools are supported by various NGOs including ZOA (Dutch NGO), Consortium (American NGO) and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). For some years (during 1980s and early 1990s), Karen schools were not allowed to teach Burmese. Those who speak Burmese were considered as Burmese spies. Therefore, many young Karen people cannot speak Burmese. But they are often good at English. Today, Karen schools teach Burmese. Karen Education Department under the Karen National Union (KNU) and Karen Teachers Working Groups (KTWG) are working on education of the children of internally displaced persons (IDP) inside Karen state.

'Thinking Classroom' Workshop in Karenni Camp 2, 2004

4.6 Western Part of Burma

The ethnic nationalities living in the western part of Burma, Chin, Rakhine and others, receive low quality education the same as in other remote areas of Burma. The refugee children on the Bangladesh-Burma border now receive primary education. Many Chin young people leave for abroad – India, Malaysia, Thailand and western countries. They can get good education there and hope they will go back to their land one day and work for the community.

5. Historical Context of Educational Reform

The Burmese regime is subject to many criticisms for the backwardness of education in Burma. However, this paper has no intention to blame others. Its intention is to make a contribution to educational change in a transitional period. In the past, we had national level educational changes but these changes used top-down strategies. In the following, the study looks back to the historical periods of educational changes in Burma to inform readers how the previous governments worked on education and why Burma needs democratic educational change.

5.1 Colonial Education to National Education

In 1946, the post-war British administration of Burma appointed a non-official committee to submit an education report for the transition to national independence. The ten-member committee included U Pe Maung Tin, retired principal of University College Rangoon, U Chit Maung, editor of Weekly Thunderer, Saw Po Chit, ex-minister of education and Daw Ma Ma Khin, member of the legislative council headed by U Ba Yin, ex-minister of education. The committee was required to ascertain public opinion on the following seven points:

1. Compulsory universal primary education
2. Pre-war system of Grants-in-Aid schools
3. The three systems of schools, i.e. Vernacular, Anglo-Vernacular, and English
4. The grading of schools
5. Centralized education system
6. Centralized examinations
7. Medium of instruction

After a five-month study including visiting 29 places, interviews with 384 persons from social, political and professional organizations, and 222 written replies all over the country, the committee submitted a report with the following recommendations:

1. *Compulsory Primary Education*: The committee recommended providing compulsory universal primary education in some selected areas; and that the scheme should provide for the extension of compulsion by stages till it embraces the whole country within a period of ten years.
2. *System of Grants-in-Aid*: Abolition of pre-war system of Grants-in-Aid and adoption in its place of a state provided system of education.
3. *System of Schools*: The three systems of schools, *viz.* English, Anglo-Vernacular and Vernacular which were in force in pre-war days be unified into a single homogenous system.
4. *Grading of Schools*: The grading of schools into elementary schools comprising the infant class and standards I to IV; and secondary schools teaching from standards V to IX be adopted. Pre-university schools comprising standards X and XI be abandoned and that a year's course as standard X be attached to central secondary schools in the district headquarters to prepare candidates for the matriculation examination.
5. *Control of Education*: The control of education be centralized under government acting through the agency of the education department.
6. *Centralized Examinations*: A centralized examination be held at the end of the secondary course to maintain a uniform and adequate standard of instruction in all secondary schools. The idea of a centralized examination at the end of the primary stage be abandoned and that the external examination for this purpose should be in the form of local tests. The examination at the end of standard X be the matriculation examination conducted by the University of Rangoon.
7. *Medium of Instruction*: As a general rule Burmese be prescribed as the medium of instruction in the Primary stage. In schools attended by non-Burmese pupils, option to use the mother-tongue as the medium of instruction in lieu of Burmese be allowed up to the end of the Primary stage. Burmese be adopted as the medium of instruction in the Secondary stage in all schools.

The significant points in the above report were 'centralized education system' and 'centralized exams'. Daw Ma Ma Khin, one of the members of the committee disagreed with her colleagues on the 'centralized systems'. She suggested a decentralized education system (Report of the Education Policy Enquiry Committee, Burma 1946, Appendices). However, soon after the declaration of independence on January 4, 1948, the Government of the Union of Burma announced a statement of education policy which is based upon the above report of the Education Policy Enquiry Committee and practiced centralized system of education. Although the then government was formed after an election, it can be considered as a 'semi-authoritarian nationalist' regime, which preferred centralized control. However, the government confessed that the policy was not successful 'due to factors of beyond control' (see Office of the SUPDT, 1953). One of the factors may have been the outbreak of civil war in the nascent Union of Burma. The electoral democracy was ended following the military coup in 1962.

5.2 National Education to Education under Military Rule

It is no doubt that the military dictatorship exercised centralized control all over the country. In 1962, the Revolutionary Council formed by the junta led by General Ne Win

proclaimed its political programme entitled 'The Burmese Way to Socialism', wherein the policy on education was given as follows:

> Education: The Revolutionary Council believes the existing educational system unequated 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 (my italics).

Although 'socialist moral values' was part of the education policy, there was no equality of opportunity, given the priority of science subjects. Those students who were eligible to take the science route after the Standard VIII government exam were considered more intelligent students and those students who got to study arts subjects were downgraded. Under the military regime, private schools were nationalized. Christian schools were not allowed but Buddhist monastic schools could continue to function in rural areas. This was not a fair policy. The use of Burmese as the medium of instruction still remained. There was no consideration for indigenous, vernacular languages for those whose mother tongues were not Burmese. English was taught as a second language from the Fifth Standard. Children had to sit examinations at the end of each standard based on a 'pass-fail' system. National examinations were taken at Standard VIII and X. At Standard IV there was a township level examination. Examination results at Standard VIII were placed in two categories: A-list and B-list. A-list students could study science subjects at High school and B-list students could study only arts subjects. As stated above, the examination results at Standard VIII sharply segregated young students. A literacy campaign was initiated in Burma in 1964. The notable recognition of Burma's literacy campaign was the award of the 'Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Prize' for 1971 to Burma by the international tribunal of UNESCO.

Burma's military dictatorship can be classified into two generations: from 1962 to 1988 generation was led by General Ne Win; and 1988 to date was post-Ne Win generation led by General Saw Maung and General Than Shwe. The school systems have been the same under the first and second generations except that there is no longer A-list and B-list after the Standard VIII exam. Students have to choose one out of seven options of subject groupings which are science groupings, arts groupings and combination of both science and arts groupings. There is evidence that education under the second generation of military dictatorship is worse than the first generation (see Education in Burma 1945-2000, Thein Lwin, 2003).

Drawing upon the analysis of the two periods of unsuccessful centralized educational change in Burma, a complete study should include an example of a country where education is successfully decentralized. The study has conducted a research on 'education in democracy' in the United States as an example of a decentralized education system.

Recent political developments among ethnic opposition groups and exiled democratic groups such as National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) and National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) have sought to encourage national reconciliation and the building of a Federal Union. However, we do not know the clear position of National League for Democracy (NLD) on this development since its leaders Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and U Tin Oo are under house arrest and the party cannot function properly. Such moves are considered in this study and it discusses how change can be approached and achieved in a transition to democracy.

6. Education in a Democracy: Lessons from U.S.

We never had a taste of decentralization in education in Burma. It was clear in the 1988 nation-wide demonstration and 1990 election[4] that people want to create a democratic society. The study strongly suggests that education can be a platform for democratization. It is important that we need to practice democratic principles in education. The study has taken account of the decentralized education system at different levels in the United States. It is interesting that each state has a full responsibility to operate schools; local and school authorities also have enough room to create curriculum. I have also learnt a new concept of 'charter school', which I will discuss in the following paragraphs. I understand that we cannot plant a tree in Burma from a different soil and climate. However, we can learn lessons from others and borrow successful strategies for the benefit of our country.

6.1 The Role of Federal Government

The United States has a highly decentralized system of education. There is no national school system. There are no national laws addressing a prescribed curriculum. Education is primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States. In accordance with the US Constitution, the ultimate authority to create and administer education policy rests with the 50 States. The federal government plays a limited but important role in ensuring equity, supporting state and local educational improvement efforts, providing financial support, gathering statistics and conducting research.

6.2 The Role of State Governments

Education policy and administration in the United States begins at the state level and continues at the local and school levels. Regardless of size, each state and territory is internally self-governing and has authority with respect to educational matters within its jurisdiction. Education policy is developed by the state board of education and the state legislature, while the state department of education is responsible for implementing policy and overseeing the state's school districts. 'State boards of education' are bodies of prominent citizens that, depending on the state, are either appointed by the legislature or governor, or elected by the public. Their job is to conduct oversight of statewide educational policies and operations, determine budget priorities, approve new policies and guidelines (including curriculum guidelines), and approve certain professional appointments.

6.3 The Role of Local Governments (School Districts)

Even though constitutional authority over education is ultimately vested in the state governments, most states delegate the operation and many aspects of policymaking to local school districts. Each of the approximately 15,000 school districts in the United States oversees its jurisdiction's public elementary and secondary schools, while private schools are generally independent of local authority. (Most public post-secondary institutions are part of state post-secondary education systems, and are therefore not governed by a school district. Private post-secondary institutions are relatively autonomous.) Authority over the curriculum varies, states prescribe general curriculum guidelines. There has been a recent tendency to increase local autonomy, including greater site-based decision making with regard to matters such as the school budget and the implementation of special programs.

[4] The military regime did not transfer power to the elected representatives.

6.4 Elementary and Secondary Education

Elementary and secondary education in the United States generally span 12 academic years. The academic year generally lasts approximately 9 months (180 days). In elementary school (grades 1-6), classes are generally organized under a single teacher who is responsible for teaching all subject areas. Teachers are assisted by subject specialists and teaching assistants. For secondary school students (grades 7-12), there are usually 5 or 6 periods during a typical school day and students go to a different classroom for each period.

The funding of public elementary and secondary schools in the United States is also highly decentralized. The federal government provides approximately 7% of total funding, while 47% and 46% of funding comes from the state and the local governments, respectively. The federal government provides grants to states and school districts to support improved educational quality and reforms.

6.5 Types of Schools

There are different types of schools in the United States such as public schools, private schools, charter schools, magnet schools and virtual schools. A great majority of US elementary and secondary students attend *public schools* while 11% attend private institutions. *Private schools* are often affiliated to a religious group and their funding comes from student tuition and donations.

Charter schools are public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the local and state regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Charter schools allow parents, community leaders and educational entrepreneurs the flexibility to innovate, create and provide students with increased educational options. Charter schools exercise increased autonomy in return for stronger accountability. They are sponsored by designated local, state, or other organizations that monitor their quality and integrity while holding them accountable for academic results and fiscal practices. The first charter school legislation was passed in Minnesota in 1991. The number of charter schools is growing every year. In 2006, there were 4,000 charter schools operating in the United States attended by more than a million students (www.edreform.com). That is over 2% of elementary and secondary school students attending all over the country. There are about 43 million students in public schools and 5 million in private schools in the United States in 2006. In 2005, the number of charter schools was 3,500 (www.schoolmatters.com).

Magnet schools are designed to attract students from diverse social, economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds by focusing on a specific subject, such as science, technology, or the arts. Some magnet schools required students to take an exam or demonstrate knowledge or skills in the specialty to qualify to go to the school, while others are open to students who express an interest in that area.

The type of studying at v*irtual schools* is also called ‘distance learning’. Instead of taking classes in a school building, students can receive their education using a computer through a virtual school. Virtual schools have an organized curriculum. Depending on the state and district, students can take the full curriculum or individual classes. Some school districts have used these online schools to offer classes that will help students learn at their own pace. Virtual education is sometimes used in remote areas for specialized or advanced courses that are not available in the immediate area.

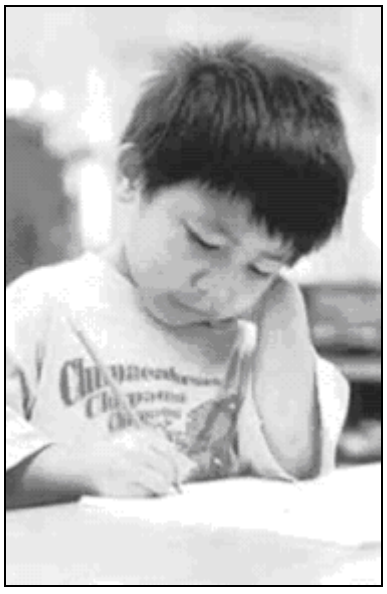
6.6 School Curriculum

There is no standard national curriculum as stated above. States establish their own guidelines and policies for the curriculum. Considerable freedom is left to local and school authorities to create curriculum. School districts or schools themselves generally select textbooks, adhering to state guidelines. Within these guidelines, schools, and even individual teachers determine content details and the pace of instruction so that it is suited to the characteristics of students.

Public schools are not allowed to teach religious doctrine or have a religious affiliation. According to the US constitution, there is a separation between church and state. Elementary education is not divided into different tracks (i.e. academic or vocational). But secondary school students generally have the option to pursue a university preparation or vocational-technical curriculum. However, there is a trend to integrate academic and workplace skills for all students.

6.7 Standardized Tests

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) has served as an educational barometer by administering standardized tests in the US. The idea behind the standardized testing policy is that testing serves to improve schools and teaching practice. However, it is thought that overuse and misuse of these tests is having serious negative consequences on teaching and learning. If teachers and students take more time to prepare for the tests, it may affect the students' learning. Critics also say that standardized tests disfavor students' higher-order learning.



Is the boy learning or recalling facts?
Picture: http://www.rethinkingschools.org

In the United States, standardized testing is used as a public policy strategy to establish stronger accountability measures for public education. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 requires standardized testing in public schools. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 ties public school funding to standardized tests. Under the NCLB Act, all states must test students in public schools (including charter schools) statewide to ensure that they are achieving the desired level of minimum education. The NCLB requires states to test all students in reading and math in grades 3 to 8 and at least once during grades 9 to 12. Science assessments are required at least once during grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12. It is noted that the results of state-level tests do not generally affect an individual student's grades or promotion but instead are used to assess the education quality in a school.

Students in the United States take standardized tests such as Student Achievement Test (SAT), American College Test (ACT) and Advanced Placement (AP) when applying to college. A student may take the SAT, ACT, or both depending upon the college requirements. The SAT is administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS), which is sponsored by College Board and students have to take math, reading and writing. The ACT is developed by American College Testing Program and students have to take math, reading, writing and science. Many colleges and universities in the United States translate

scores on AP tests into college credit or placement in more advanced courses. The AP includes advanced level tests in math, sciences, social studies and languages. For those students, who dropped out of schools before they finish their secondary education can take General Educational Development (GED) test. The GED test measures language arts, writing, social studies, science, reading, and math. GED certificate is recognized in all states as the equivalent of a high school diploma.

7. Implications for Burma

7.1 Decentralized Education

The study strongly suggests that decentralized system of education should be launched in Burma, which is a geographically as well as ethnically diverse nation. Even under the British administration, Burma was never a unified political state. Ethnic armed opposition groups have been fighting for self-determination since the national independence in 1948. Ethnic hatred was even stronger when the military regime practiced Burmanization over ethnic nationalities in its education policy. Indigenous languages were not allowed to be taught at schools. In return, schools run by ethnic armed groups refused to teach Burmese language at their schools. Many young Karen and Shan people cannot speak Burmese today. The groups also forbade the teaching of Burmese history and geography prescribed by the Burmese regime (Thein Lwin, 2000). Decentralization of education can therefore guarantee a space for ethnic nationality states to run their own schools and, each state will have enough room to create curriculum with their priorities and values.

It is not clear at this stage that what will be the state system in the Burma of the future. Will it be a unified political state with some degree of autonomy under one constitution? Or, will it be a federal union as suggested by the ethnic armed groups and exiled political groups? The biggest party, National League for Democracy led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi does not have a clear position on this issue. The author's personal opinion is that a 'union of authoritarian regimes' is not acceptable for a regional peace and democratic development. Whatever state system is agreed in a future democratic Burma, we need a democratic way of transferring political, economic and administrative authority to the ethnic nationality states, and a decentralized system of education should be exercised.

Communities within a Community: There will be different nationality groups in each state. In Shan State, for example, there are Wa, Lahu, Palaung, Pa-O and many other nationality groups. A decentralized education system should be available to those communities. Even in one ethnic community, there will be different visions of education such as peace education, moral education, multi-cultural education, skills development etc. The Charter School system of the United States should be considered as a possible model of educational organization in order that teachers, parents and educators may take responsibility to run a school with government support.

7.2 Consideration on the Type of 'Charter Schools'

The former grants-in-aid schools under the British administration in Burma received public funding but the schools operated as private schools. Grants-in-aid schools were only for English and Anglo-Vernacular students. These types of schools were abolished after the national independence. The suspicion was that it was privatization of state-funded education by the backdoor. However, charter schools in the United States are different from the 'grants-in-aid' schools. Charter schools are an example of transformation of public education. The schools are organized and operated by a group of

citizens, teachers or parents. They are chartered on a performance-based contract rather than rules-based governance. Charter schools have enhanced parental choice. Both Republicans and Democrats support charter schools. Former President Bill Clinton sees charter schools as a 'workable political compromise with emphasis on autonomy and accountability'. President George W. Bush sees charter schools as a way to improve schools. 'City Academies' in England, which are state-funded, independently run schools to raise standards in poor areas, are similar to charter schools.

There are criticisms of charter schools. In Michigan, many charter schools are run for profit. It is a concern that education will suffer when funding is split between profit and educational spending. A report by charter school opponents suggests that most students in charter schools perform the same or worse than their traditional public schools counterparts on standardized tests (Economic Policy Institute, 2007). The charter school movement in the United States began in 1988, when Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) called for the reform of the public schools by establishing charter schools. The idea is that 'charter schools' are legally and financially autonomous public schools (i.e. no tuition fees, no religious affiliation and no selective student admissions); free from bureaucracy and accountable for student outcomes. However, opponents of charter schools argue that this accountability is rarely exercised (ibid.). I have visited the AFT office and learnt its view on today's charter schools. The AFT weights advantages and disadvantages: the good points are that the size of charter schools is smaller than the traditional public schools and it is easy to manage (charter schools serve an average of 250 students); charter schools have clear missions, which are valuable. The weaknesses are that charter schools' teachers often do not stay for long in the job and that makes charter schools unstable; charter schools are competing with public schools and public school teachers are not happy with that; charter schools are too decentralized and lack a common standard. Further, charter school teachers are not union members and they do not receive professional development from the union.

Having considered the pros and cons of charter schools, we should consider introducing 'charter schools' as an education reform in Burma. It is participatory democracy in education – teachers, parents and educators can play a significant role in the development of education with their visions and efforts. Currently in Burma, affiliated-schools in some villages are supported by the community, and children sit exams at an affiliated government school. These schools can be 'charter schools'. Some people support monastic schools, partly because monastic education is officially allowed and religious buildings can readily be used as schools. These supporters can create a charter school. Schools on the Thai-Burma border and migrant schools are free from Burmese government and Thai government but supported by NGOs and individual donors – these schools are on a similar track to charter schools.

7.3 School System

Although there is no national school system in the United States, elementary and secondary schools in all states generally span 12 academic years. In Burma, we have 11 academic years. Kindergarten (KG), which is compulsory and teaches reading, writing and math, is included in the primary cycle and is effectively treated as the first grade. Including KG, Burma has a 5-year primary cycle, 4-year middle school and 2-year high school, a 5-4-2 system. This system was launched after 1962 military coup. After the 1948 independence, it was a 5-3-3 system. A primary cycle of 5 years was considered for the children in rural areas to complete primary education earlier and to help their parents with agricultural work. In the second system of 5-4-2, the 5+4 is inline with the universal

9 years of compulsory education. Schools run by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) use a 5-4-2 system, a total of 11 academic years. Schools run by the Karen National Union (KNU) also span 11 academic years but the system is 5-3-3. Schools run by Shan nationality groups operate only primary education at this moment. Some Burmese migrant schools in Mae Sot, Thailand reach high school level and the system is 5-4-2, totaling 11 years.

Elementary and secondary education in England span 11 academic years organized into either two or three tiers which are then divided into four key stages – Key Stage I (year groups 1-2; age 5-7); Key Stage II (year groups 3-6; age 7-11); Key Stage III (year groups 7-9; age 11-14); and Key Stage IV (year groups 10-11; age 14-16). However, for university admission, British students then have to attend college or stay on at school for a further two years and sit Advanced-Level examinations. Ordinarily, a British student will have had 13 years of schooling before entering university. Similarly in Germany, a student has 13 years of schooling before entering university. Also, German university courses tend to be longer than those in other countries. Communities in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border create post-10 schools, which offer one or two-year courses in math, English and some other subjects for the students who completed 10th standard education in camps.

In consideration of Burmese students wanting to attend universities in western countries, we need to change the school system to fit in with the international school system. The study suggests a system of 5-4-3 - total of 12 years - to complete secondary education. The 5-year primary cycle is current in primary schools all over the country, and buildings are designed for a 5-year cycle. If we upgrade the primary cycle to 6 years, for example, we need more school buildings. I do not think it right for the children in rural areas to quit schools earlier than others after primary education. We need children to learn at school for at least nine years of compulsory education. With sufficient budget to build more schools, we can have a 6-3-3 system, including nine years of compulsory education.

7.4 School Curriculum

Curriculum has been a battle field between educators and politicians. I have had a series of discussions and seminars with ethnic nationality leaders on educational issues along the Thai-Burma border and China-Burma border since 2000. Politicians want to include their works and political ideas in the school curriculum. Educators do not encourage imposing one-sided view. While the curriculum prescribed by the military regime receives the criticism for 'Burmanization', the curricula designed by the ethnic nationality groups produce 'excessive nationalism' (Thein Lwin, 2000). Education must not be used as a vehicle to promote racial, ideological, economic or other segregated elements. Further, curriculum should not be designed by one person or one group; it should be involved all stakeholders. A school curriculum should be a meeting place for a large number of citizens – pupils, teachers, parents, elected representatives, trades unions, ethnic groups, religions, etc., and it needs to accommodate as many interests as possible.

The study suggests that national education authority sets a 'minimum standard'. Each state establishes curriculum guidelines adhering to the 'national minimum standard'. Based on these guidelines, local education authorities and schools will have freedom to create curriculum, which will be approved by the state education board. School authorities and teachers will select textbooks, adhering to the curriculum and guidelines. Within the guidelines, schools and teachers will determine content details, and classroom

instruction will be linked to the characteristics of students. Charter schools in the United States, for example, create their own curricula but these are approved by their local charter school board. Even for public schools, school authorities have freedom to implement the curriculum. For example, the Francis Scott Key Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia has an 'immersion' program offering students to be bi-literate and bilingual in Spanish and English, which is not the same as other public schools. The E. L. Haynes Public Charter School in Washington DC has a 'Year-Round' program and 'Extensive' program. The Year-Round program is that the school organizes summer programs (both academic and physical activities) during the school holidays. The school also provides extensive programs outside school hours – before-school and after-school – in addition to the mandated 1,200 hours of education that every student in District of Columbia receives in a year. Through these programs, the E. L. Haynes students can access an additional 1,000 educational hours free of charge.

However, if the parents of a child move from one place to another, the child will have to change to another school. To get the same grade at another school, we will need a standard. If we can make a 'content standard' among different school curricula, a child will have a standard level of knowledge and skills appropriate to any school. We will need coordination and collaboration among educators of different states and school districts. Teachers and educators can meet each other in seminars and conferences and exchange their knowledge and experiences.

7.5 Medium of Instruction and Languages

The language issue is related to culture, national identity and politics. Through discussions and seminars during 2000-2002, the ethnic nationality groups generally agreed the Indian model of a 'three-language policy' to teach children at school. For example, a Karen student will learn Karen, Burmese and English at a school in Karen State. Some Shan nationalists, however, do not agree with the teaching of Burmese at schools in Shan State. Some Shan educators see a technical problem – for example, a school in the Lahu regional area in Shan State will teach the Lahu language. If Shan State agrees the 'three-language policy', these would be Lahu, Shan and English languages - that means no Burmese language. However, it is important to view language as more than culture, national identity and politics. We need to communicate with other people who speak other languages. If future Burma is a federal union or a unified political state, we will have an official common language or a national language. The common language or national language will be the medium of instruction at schools.

I have visited schools run by ethnic national groups – Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan and Wa. Except for schools in Shan State, all other schools teach Burmese. Kachin schools teach Kachin language from KG to 7th standard; Burmese and English are taught from KG to 10th standard. In Kachin State, there are seven dialects, but schools use Jinpaw dialect as the school language. Schools run by Karen and Karenni teach their languages and Burmese from KG to 8th standard; English is taught as a subject from KG to 8th standard, but English becomes the medium of instruction at 9th and 10th standards.

Although they teach Burmese, they do not have qualified Burmese teachers. Besides, the schools use textbooks from inside Burma. These textbooks are designed for Burmese children, who speak Burmese at home and with friends before they enter the school. For Karen children, they speak Karen at home and with friends. These textbooks are not suitable for their needs. We will need a program of teaching of Burmese for the speakers of other languages. To provide a suggestion for the teaching of Burmese, my colleagues

and I conducted research on the effectiveness of Burmese language teaching in a Karen school and a Karenni school in 2001 (Thein Lwin, Barnabas and Nan Lung, 2001). After completing the 8th standard, Karen students can not speak, read and write Burmese well; but Karenni students speak Burmese well. The significant difference is the practice of Burmese language. Karen students speak only Karen languages in the Karen community. Karenni State has many different dialect groups and they do not understand each other – they use Burmese as a common language.

Regarding the teaching of mother tongue, I encourage ethnic educators and political leaders to promote their languages for use as a medium of instruction. I organized a scholarship program with the support of Prospect Burma and the Open Society Institute in 2002. Five students from the five different ethnic nationality groups got admission at the University of Newcastle, UK. I suggested to them that they study language systems to promote their own languages to become a medium of instruction. However, they changed to different subjects – two students took teaching English as a second language and three students took educational management. What I want to say is that the ethnic languages should be promoted. However, they are not well developed and should be further developed by scholars.

7.6 Assessment of Students learning

I have discussed above about the 'content standard' to consider when we design curricula and suggest that there is a need to describe the body of knowledge, skills and understanding that all students should have. In this paragraph, I will explore about the 'achievement standard' that describes the performance of students and schools. The achievement of a school is usually measured by the achievement of its students. Since the school reform movement is moving from 'rule-based' governance to 'performance-based' contract, the achievement of students is much more important. The success of a school depends on the success of its students. Test results are used as an indicator of students' achievement. Since learning is institutionalized in human history such as elementary schools, secondary schools, universities, degrees and certificates, it is necessary to measure the level of achievement.

My understanding is that learning is a 'process'. When a student is learning, she acquires new knowledge; she tries to understand the new knowledge clearly; she will apply the new knowledge into practice; she will analyze the new knowledge in detail; she will compare with her prior knowledge; and then she will think and reflect and get new ideas. It is a complex social and psychological process. It may not be the same process to all students. The tests usually measure the knowledge and skill level of a student rather than the student's level of thinking. If students and teachers focus on tests, it may affect their learning and higher order thinking.

Government exams and pass-fail system destroy Burmese education. Teachers, students and parents all focus on examinations. Teaching is becoming preparation for exams. Students learn by heart the texts they need to sit exams. There are corruption and cheating under this exam system. Many students today do not even learn by heart; they cheat in the exam. Exam papers can be bought before the exam and students can also buy marks after the exam. It is chaos in Burmese education. Schools run by ethnic nationality groups also use pass-fail year-end exams. For example, a six-standard student in Mae La refugee camp failed an exam three times and repeated the same class for four years. A student comes to school to learn but not for getting a punishment. We must reform this kind of exam system. The study suggests formative assessment such as diagnosis assessment;

criterion referenced tests; product assessment; and student's portfolio rather than summative year-end exams. Portfolios might contribute to the learning process as well as school performance and other indicators.

However, we may need standardized tests once in each stage – primary stage, middle school (junior secondary), and high school (senior secondary). These tests will measure the educational quality of a school; the results of the tests may not affect a student's grades or promotion. When a student applies for a university course, there should be a university entrance exam determined by the requirements of the university. University entrance exams should be administered by the boards of universities free of cheating and corruption. Burmese universities usually practice grading system. We may need to introduce a credit system in the university to internationalize the programs to facilitate student transfers to other universities and other international relations possibilities for the universities.

7.7 Teachers

Quality of education largely depends on the quality of teachers. In Burmese schools many teachers enter the classroom without any training in lesson planning, curriculum management, classroom management, teaching methods, assessment and required subject knowledge. Some teachers get training after one or two years working at a school. Since the quality of education has been low in Burma, teachers' subject skills (such as in science, history, math etc.) is also questionable even though they may have graduated in particular subjects. In refugee camps, teachers are recruited from the refugee population. For young people who fled from Burma, their education was interrupted. Due to the shortage of teachers, they may be nominated by the community to be teachers at the camp schools. At the migrant schools in Mae Sot, most teachers are self appointed volunteer teachers. Some primary school teachers completed only primary education and secondary school teachers completed only secondary education. Only a few are graduates.

Burmese education system also downgrades the status of primary school teachers. For example, when a primary school teacher gets promotion, she becomes a secondary school teacher and gets more salary. The system downgrades the importance of primary education as the foundation of social, moral and academic progress in that the system allows for unqualified candidates to teach primary school children (Thein Lwin, 2000). Since primary education is as important as secondary education, all teachers should be treated equally. Teacher training institutions should recruit trainees according to the interests of the teachers (i.e. a preference for primary education or for secondary education).

In teacher training, pedagogy and subject knowledge should be regarded equally and future teacher recruitment criteria should include a Bachelor level degree, subject matter competence, completion of course work in teaching methods, assessment methods, curriculum development and classroom management. For example, the University of Newcastle UK has a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) one-year course for those graduates who wish to become a teacher. They hold a Bachelor degree in a particular subject (math, science, geography, art etc.). They take courses at the University and undertake teaching practice at a school. In the United States, a Bachelor degree and the Praxis series of teacher certification are needed to be a teacher. The Praxis series are assessments that provide educational tests as a part of teacher certification process. The Praxis 1 tests measure basic academic skills in reading, writing and math; the Praxis 2 tests measure subject-specific knowledge and teaching skills; and the Praxis 3 tests assess classroom performance.

There are many young people in Burma, who have completed a degree course in arts and sciences subjects, may choose a career in education. They will take a post-graduate diploma course and apply for teacher certification. Current teachers, who have been working without a proper education in the hard days, should continue their career in education. These teachers, although they have not completed an established certification process, have a rich experience in teaching and understand how to motivate students for their learning. These are alternative qualifications that should be recognized. We should organize continuing professional development programs in education; through these programs, they will become certified teachers.

If there are vacancies at a school, the school board or local education board will advertise publicly. Teacher appointments should be made by the school board with approval of the local education board. Teachers' appointments or transferring should be local decision. Under the military regime all educational management are rigidly controlled by the ministry level authorities and there are many stories of corruption.

8. Classroom-Level Educational Change

Thinking Classroom Workshop

Since 2001, my colleagues and I have tried classroom-level educational reform in the light of teaching, learning and classroom environments through teacher training. Traditional Burmese classrooms are predominately passive, encouraging rote learning. Teachers take authoritative role and students are expected to be disciplined and passive rather than active participation. We encourage teachers to promote students' active participation and 'critical thinking'. We develop critical thinking teaching methods as a classroom practice with the support of 'Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking' (RWCT) project initiated by the International Reading Association and the Open Society Institute. RWCT was designed to promote active learning and critical thinking, and we have always acknowledged its contribution to building grassroots democracy, in the tradition of John Dewey.

"I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform."

John Dewey, 1897

This Quotation Is Displayed at the Teacher College, Columbia University

These methods are designed to help students think reflectively, take ownership for their personal learning, and become independent lifelong learners. When critical thinking methods are used, students become more insightful; they listen, read and write

respectively but critically; they are better able to think for themselves and for others; and they form their own opinions and support them with evidences. The RWCT methods demonstrate a three-phase model for organizing teaching and learning. In phase one, students are encouraged to reveal their prior knowledge and to consider their assumptions about a topic, and frame their questions about it. In phase two, students actively inquire into the topic. The third 'reflection' phase encourages students to consider what they have learnt and to think of the topic in different ways, or apply the ideas to new situations.

The RWCT project is fore grounded in a publication by UNESCO in 2004 (http://www.ibe.unesco.org). The CD-ROM 'Learning to Live Together: Good Practices in Schools' was published by UNESCO and the International Board of Education (IBE) in Geneva. What is significant about the IBE Publication is that RWCT is featured as one of 25 recommended practices for crisis prevention and peace building drawn from all around the world. RWCT has been very active in Eastern Europe including Romania, Czech Republic and Ukraine. My organization, Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers (TTBT) is a member of the RWCT International Consortium based in Romania (http://ct-net.net).

The TTBT's teacher training course (www.educationburma.net) covers the foundations of education including learning theories, curriculum rationale, philosophy of education, and history of education in Burma. We facilitate 'Thinking Classroom' (RWCT) workshops. Lesson planning and classroom management across the ability range are also included. Students also have opportunity to improve their study skills, IT skills and English proficiency. In the first few years, we recruited students from refugee camps who had completed secondary education and wished to become teachers. However, it became increasingly difficult for Burmese refugees to travel from their camps to Chiang Mai, northern Thailand year by year, and we had to change the training model. We then recruited senior teachers with recognized leadership skills and evident dedication to educational work. We provide them with a foundation course, RWCT training and a train-the-trainers workshop. Following training, they become trainers and re-train other teachers at their own schools and near-by schools. Also, in collaboration with the NGOs working on education in refugee camps, we trained senior teachers and teacher-trainers from camps and they organized second generation training in nine refugee camps. In 2005 and 2006, the Karen Education Project (KEP)'s trainers provided RWCT workshops in seven refugee camps. According to a recent report, more than 700 teachers have received RWCT training with the KEP project.

Since 2005, we also recruit senior teachers from inside Burma using the train-the-trainers model. Course graduates organize second generation training inside Burma. We also provide local RWCT workshops in Kachin State, northern Burma, and to migrant school teachers in Mae Sot, Phuket/Kho Lak and Mahachai in Thailand. From the Chiang Mai training alone, 160 teachers have completed training; from the second generation training about 1,200 teachers completed the training (800 in refugee camps and 400 inside Burma); from the local RWCT workshops 200 teachers completed the training (65 in Kachin, 100 in Mae Sot; 20 in Phuket and 15 in Mahachai). In total, about 1,600 teachers received training in our program and 40,000 students have been given opportunity to practice active participation and critical thinking learning strategies.

Training courses can be organized because of the commitment of my colleagues, volunteer trainers and international donors. Professors, lecturers and teachers from US, UK and Canada come to Thailand during their holidays and teach at our training as volunteers. Thanks to education charities and foundations including Prospect Burma, UK;

Burma Educational Scholarship Trust, Scotland; Pam Baker Foundation, Hong Kong; Richard Hua Education Trust, Singapore; Help without Borders, Italy; Open Society Institute, USA; and individual donors, we have been able to continue our program for seven years until today.

The RWCT strategies change the teacher's role in the classroom. A teacher becomes a thoughtful facilitator of students' learning rather than playing an authoritative role. The classroom is also changed to become a student learning community where students participate actively, practice critical thinking and gain ownership of their learning. These new strategies offer 'democratic experiences and practices' within the classrooms. It is intended not only for the personal development of individual students but also for the development of a better society. Therefore, the RWCT strategies can be considered as useful tools for classroom-level educational change in Burmese schools. I have observed some classrooms conducted by RWCT trained teachers and, found that both students and teachers enjoyed in their lessons.

We also change the classroom environment. Traditional Burmese classrooms are designed seating plan for students to face the teacher and black board. We now encourage teachers and students to change the seating plan for discussions and cooperative learning – sometime small groups discussions; and sometime whole group roundtable discussions. The teacher is one of the discussants in the roundtable and when students are learning, the teacher is a facilitator of students' learning. We also encourage them to display students' works such as paintings, cartoons, poems, essays and materials in the classroom including on the walls. This makes the classroom belong to the students in the sense of ownership of their learning. This kind of classroom setting is seen at all schools I have visited in the United States. However, Burmese classrooms are usually a big size – some classrooms have approximately 80 students. We may need to reduce the class size to fewer than 30 students so that teachers can facilitate effectively. At this moment we cannot reduce the size due to shortage of teachers and lack of resources. Small groups setting are possible to create 'thinking classrooms' in a big class. Besides, in Burmese classrooms, students have to learn in the same classroom for a whole school year. The subject teachers move around the classrooms to teach their particular subjects. In the United States, students move around different classrooms to learn different subjects such as science, math, geography, art, physical education. This method is good in the way that subject teachers can collect and display teaching aids in the same classroom and students will have physical movement after each lesson.

Francis Scott Key School, Virginia 2007: Students design a picture with geometric forms

The rationale behind the classroom-level change is that we create a democratic environment hoping that democratic practices in schools play an important role in

developing democratic citizens in the transition towards democratic societies. We name this strategy as the 'Thinking Classroom'. The thinking classroom strategy can be used in all grades and subjects with existing curricula. This strategy is suitable for schools in all states and communities where different curricula are in use. The 'thinking classroom' is a significant change in Burmese education. However, 'critical thinking' is not new for Burmese society. It is a part of Buddha's teaching.[5]

In the 'thinking classroom' students are encouraged to explore different views. However, it is important that there is no right and wrong answer in the classroom discussion. If there is no consensus, students can construct a 'value line' and they can stand somewhere on the imaginative line without fighting each other. If children think critically, controversial issues can be discussed in the classroom. For example, some historical events are controversial such as forty-year-long war between Mon and Burmese; these events can be discussed. In a 'thinking classroom', students and teachers use textbooks as references. They can use any text from different sources. They can interview people to get answers. They can make their own research and learn history as a historian. In this way, the recent debate on the 'intelligent design' movement in the US and UK relating to 'creation vs. evolution' can be discussed in the classroom. But students will respect each other views while they can hold or change their views.

9. Recommendations

Recommendations are made in the core categories of national policy, school curriculum, medium of instruction and languages, assessment and standardized test, grading of schools, universal compulsory education, teachers and teacher certification, and classroom level educational change. The recommendations may be changed according to local needs.

9.1 National to Local Level

- Whatever state system is established in a democratic Burma, a decentralized education system should be introduced.
- Each state should establish its own schools and educate its children according to its own priorities, values and needs.
- Minorities in each state may establish their own schools and educate their children according to their own priorities, values and needs.
- A group of educators, teachers and parents should be allowed to establish a school according to their own priorities, values and needs.
- A national education authority should be in a position to set 'minimum standards'.

9.2 Curriculum

- Each state should establish guidelines and policies for its own school curriculum adhering to the 'national minimum standard'.
- Local education boards and schools should adhere to state guidelines when creating school curricula.
- Schools and teachers should have the freedom to choose textbooks according to curriculum needs.

[5] In the Kalama Sutta, the Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry, Buddha encouraged the Kesaputta villagers to think critically.

9.3 Medium of Instruction and Languages

- The medium of instruction at schools in each state should be bilingual (one local language and Burmese).
- Local authorities should determine the local language for school instruction.
- English should be a second language at both primary and secondary levels.

9.4 Assessment and Standardized Tests

- 'Formative assessments' should be made continuously to support students' learning.
- Standardized tests should be made statewide once in each stage (primary, middle and high school) to measure the educational quality of a school. The results of the tests should not affect a student's grades or promotion.
- University entrance exams should be held according to admission requirements.

9.5 Grading of Schools and Universal Compulsory Education

- A twelve-year cycle of basic education should be introduced: 5-year primary school, 4-year middle school and 3-year high school (5-4-3 system).
- Nine-year universal, compulsory education should be launched in all states.

9.6 Teachers and Teacher Certification

- A standard for teacher certification is needed in each state.
- Continuing professional development should be supported for current and newly recruited teachers to master both pedagogy and required subject skills.
- Teachers of primary and secondary schools should be treated equally. They should be assigned a level according to their preference.
- Teacher appointments should be made by the school board with the approval of the local education board.

9.7 Classroom Level Educational Change

- We should start classroom level educational reform by creating 'thinking classrooms' at all grades and subjects.
- We will need to reduce class size to fewer than 30 students.

10. Potential Barriers and Challenges

I would like to address some potential barriers and challenges that may arise during the process of educational change. Through my roundtable discussions and informal talks, I realize that controversial issues will include the distribution of central power, local capacity and the financial situation of the regions, languages, common identity, shared values, monastic education, and the elites.

Although I am a supporter of local decision-making and decentralization, I suggest that there should be a place for national policy development and financing. A national or federal education agency has a mandate to develop and then transfer increasing levels of authority to state agencies. A national education authority would facilitate the transition from national to decentralized education allowing local agencies develop the necessary professional expertise to serve education needs in the states. A national education authority would also be in a position to set 'minimum standards' for states so that there is

some sense of a national as well as local purpose and a national agenda for educational accomplishment. The minimum standards would have to allow for state influence by leaving space within the curriculum for local input. Guidelines for teacher certification that incorporate national minimum standards and add competencies and teacher preparation programming can also be developed by states as they consider appropriate.

In my recommendations, I suggest that minorities in each ethnic state may have decision-making power to create their own schools. In reality, some regions may not be able to take on the responsibility of running schools or creating curricula due to a scarcity of human resources in terms of skills and understanding of complex instructional practices. In these cases, national or federal government should provide financial and technical support to these regions.

In a decentralized system, I suggest that each state educate its children according to its own priorities, values and needs. A question arises: what will be the shared values for all citizens of Burma? Shared values and priorities should be expressed at a national level but leave room for local values and priorities. We have rich cultures and colorful traditions belonging to each nationality group. In the current national curriculum prescribed by the regime, Burman culture and tradition occupy a large share of the material, with little room for other nationality groups. When each group creates its own curriculum, each will have enough room to promote its culture and traditions. However, each state and region should uphold shared values and expectations to serve immediate national needs. Furthermore, logistical issues such as grading of schools, length of school year, basic curriculum content, and provision for children with special educational needs may require national regulation so that there is equality of opportunity and consistency from one state to another. As a shared value we can provide sincere universal basic democratic education for children. Citizenship education, for example, which teaches social, moral and political development, should be introduced at all schools in Burma. In some countries, such as England, citizenship education is taught as a single subject. In many countries citizenship education is included in social studies. I suggest that citizenship education can promote democratic values and should be introduced in all states and regions as a minimum standard.

The issue of language is more difficult since it is related to national identity, politics and culture. Burmese people usually say that ‘if you lose your own language, you lose your national identity’. However, ethnic languages have had little chance to develop under the military regime. Some are not ready for use as school languages. However, it is their right to teach their language in school. Taking into consideration minority languages in each state is important, so we will need language institutes to maintain and develop these languages. Local communities should determine the local language for school instruction; the number of years it is taught (i.e. primary level or secondary level) will depend on the sophistication of that language. Some people suggest that local language should be an optional subject for speakers of other languages. If a school has a tight policy on language, it may unnecessarily produce segregation in education. Educators today encourage inclusive education. We may therefore need to operate multi-ethnic schools in regions where people of different ethnic backgrounds live together.

Another potential problem is the relationship between schools and religion. Education at the Buddhist monasteries has been a Burmese tradition. Buddhist monks are also happy to serve as teachers and to use their religious buildings as schools. Since Burma is a multi-religious society, it may not be a fair policy that other religions are not allowed to

run schools. However, I propose that public schools provide secular education while the monasteries offer religious studies.

When I talk about equal opportunity in education with emphasis on children living in rural and mountainous areas and children of poor family backgrounds, I may possibly be faced with an elitist offensive. Some people may think that I do not give thought to the education of children of middle-class background who consider themselves to be elites. While public education is often designed to educate the general population to produce knowledgeable and skilled citizens, I suggest that elitism in education could be based upon learning abilities and talent of the student, not his or her economic and social background.

11. Conclusion

Even in Burma's current political situation, it is possible to initiate classroom-level educational change. We can educate young people to become responsible citizens as a force for democracy through the promotion of 'thinking classrooms'. As an essential step in the process, we need teacher education and professional development, which are central to the development of education. It is also essential for local communities to increase capacity to serve local as well as national needs well. Moreover, this paper encourages promoting the status of teachers by increasing salaries and providing material support such as housing. We need more research studies which will underpin planning and implementation of policy at all levels, teaching, learning and curriculum development. More study in other areas – higher education, vocational education, adult education, and early childhood education – is also needed. Finally, this study suggests that universal compulsory education be a long-term goal.

Bibliography

Bloom B. S. (1956) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain. New York David McKay Co. Inc.

Crawford *et al* (2005) Teaching and Learning Strategies for the Thinking Classroom, Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking International Consortium. Burmese versions of these guidebooks are available at the Teacher Training Centre for Burmese Teachers

Dewey, John (1916, 1944) Democracy and Education, an Introduction to the Philosophy of Education, the Free Press, a Division of Simon & Schuster Inc.

Economic Policy Institute (2007) The Charter School Dust Up
http://www.epinet.org/content.cfm/book_charter_school

Education Policy Enquiry Committee, Burma (1946). The Report of the Education Policy Enquiry Committee. Published by the Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationary, Rangoon, Burma

Education Week (2007) Charter Schools http://www.edweek.org/issues/charter-schools

Gardner, Howard (1983; 1993) Frames of Mind: The theory of multiple intelligences, New York: Basic Books

International Bureau of Education (1999) Thinkers on Education, UNESCO Publishing

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

Office of the SUPDT (1953). Education in Burma, before the independence and after independence. Govt. Printing and Stationery, Burma. November

Pulliam and Van Patten (2007) History of Education in America, 9th Edition, Pearson Education, Inc.,

Steele J, Meredith K, Temple C (1998) Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Guidebooks 1-8, Open Society Institute. Burmese versions of these guidebooks are available at the Teacher Training Centre for Burmese Teachers

Thein Lwin (2000). Educational Cost of Army Rule, presented at the seminar 'Burma Days in Oslo' (September 24-28), University of Oslo, Norway

Thein Lwin (2002). Issues Surrounding Curriculum Development in the Ethnic Nationality Areas of Burma, presented at the Burma Studies Conference, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden, 21-25 September 2002. This paper was also presented at the Burma Conference in Ottawa, Canada, 8-10 October 2002

Thein Lwin (2003). Education in Burma (1945-2000). The initial findings of this study were presented at the South Asian Conference on Education (November 14-18, 1999), University of Delhi, India. It was also presented at the seminar 'What can be the Impact of Education Situation in Burma to the Thai Society' (May 24, 2001), Thammasat University, Thailand. The book was publishes in 2003 both Burmese and English

Thein Lwin (2003). Learning in a Democracy, The Irrawaddy, Covering Burma and Southeast Asia published in Thailand, July

Thein Lwin (2006). Education in Burma: Hope for the Future: This paper has been presented at the 2006 IDAC Conference, Interactive, Diversified, Autonomous, Creative Literacy; Conference, Exhibition & Storytelling Festival; Taipei Public Library, November 4-5

Thein Lwin, Barnabas and Nan Lung (2001 November). A Report on the Teaching of Burmese at a Karen School and a Karenni School, presented at the education seminar held in Chiang Mai, Thailand organised by National Health and Education Committee

Thein Lwin, Barnabas and Nan Lung (2001 September). Curriculum Development Issues and the Teaching of Children's Mother Tongue at School, presented at the education seminar held in Chiang Mai, Thailand organised by the National Health and Education Committee

US Department of Education (2004) 'Successful Charter Schools', Office of Innovation and Improvement, Washington DC

US Department of Education (2005) 'Choosing a School for Your Child', No Child Left Behind, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Washington DC

US Department of Education (2005) Education in the United States a Brief Overview

Contact:

Dr. Thein Lwin, theinl@ned.org edubur@gmail.com
Website: www.educationburma.net