Monastic Teachers as Potential Agents of Change? Exploring the Roles and Agency of Monastic Teachers in Myanmar’s Processes of Social Cohesion

Image 1: Lecture at a monastic school in Mandalay, Myanmar. Courtesy of the author.

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Table of Contents

List of Acronyms................................................................................................................. 4
List of Figures, Images, Boxes and Tables ............................................................................. 5
Abstract............................................................................................................................... 6
Acknowledgements............................................................................................................... 7
1. Introduction .................................................................................................................... 8
   1.1. First Impressions from the Fieldwork: Inter-faith Rally and Aung San Suu Kyi’s Speech .... 8
   1.2. Multifaceted Nature of Conflict in Myanmar ............................................................ 9
   1.3. Social cohesion ......................................................................................................... 11
   1.4. Monastic Education Sector ...................................................................................... 11
2. Positioning this Study in Relevant Academic Debates ...................................................... 13
   2.1. Research Questions ................................................................................................. 14
3. Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................... 15
   3.1. Social Cohesion ......................................................................................................... 17
   The 4Rs Framework for Sustainable Peacebuilding/Social Cohesion ................................ 19
   3.2. Teacher Agency ....................................................................................................... 20
   3.3. Conceptual Scheme .................................................................................................. 22
4. Methodology .................................................................................................................... 23
   4.1. Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................. 24
   4.2. Researcher Positionality .......................................................................................... 25
   4.3. Research Design and Data Collection ..................................................................... 26
   4.4. Data Analysis .......................................................................................................... 31
   4.5. Limitations of this Study ......................................................................................... 32
5. Layout of Empirical Chapters .......................................................................................... 33
   6.1. Introducing Monastic Teachers (the Sample) ........................................................... 33
   6.2. Teachers’ Roles for Social Cohesion ....................................................................... 34
   6.3. Teachers’ Motivation for their Work ...................................................................... 41
   6.4. Concluding chapter 6: Monastic Teachers’ Multifaceted Roles for Social Cohesion .... 49
7. The Role of Monastic Schools in the field of Education and Social Cohesion .................. 53
   7.1. Recognition .............................................................................................................. 56
   7.2. Redistribution ......................................................................................................... 63
   7.3. Representation ......................................................................................................... 65
   7.4. Reconciliation ......................................................................................................... 67
   7.5. Concluding Chapter 7 - Contested Role of Monastic Schools in Social Cohesion ...... 70
8. Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 72
9. Recommendations for Future Research ................................................................. 75
Bibliography ................................................................................................................ 76
Appendices.................................................................................................................... 83
  Appendix 1 Main Research Locations: Mandalay, Yangon (MM), and Chiang Mai (THA) ........ 83
  Appendix 2 Personal, Professional Development & Critical Thinking Skills Workshops ........ 84
  Appendix 3 Interview Guide – Semi-structured Interviews with Teachers ...................... 86
  Appendix 4 Interview Guide – Semi-structured Interviews with MEDG Staff Members ....... 87
  Appendix 5 PEWG Poster – 4Rs Analysis of Monastic Schools .................................... 88
List of Acronyms

CESR Comprehensive Education Sector Review
CSO Civil Society Organisation
EFA Education for All
JICA Japan International Cooperation Agency
MEDG Monastic Education Development Group
MoE Ministry of Education
NCA National Ceasefire Agreement
NESP National Education Sector Plan
NLD National League for Democracy
PEWG Peacebuilding and Education Working Group
PPD&CTS Professional and Personal Development & Critical Thinking Skills
RWCT Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking
SDGs Sustainable Development Goals
List of Figures, Images, Boxes and Tables

Figure 1 Adapted essentialist approach to social cohesion
Figure 2 Conceptual scheme
Figure 3 Audit trail
Figure 4 Motivation as a dynamic element of teachers’ agency
Figure 5 The 4Rs theoretical framework

Image 1 Lecture at a monastic school in Mandalay
Image 2 Inter-faith rally in Yangon
Image 3 Informal Conversations with the Buddhist monks in Mandalay
Image 4 Story telling at the ‘Open Library’ in Mandalay
Image 5 Pupils facing the blackboard and chanting Buddhist prayers before the beginning of the lesson

Box 1 Theoretical adaptations
Box 2 Gathering information while considering issues of safety
Box 3 Environment and circumstances affect teacher agency
Box 4 The case of project ‘Diverance’
Box 5 Abbots’ views of monastic teachers
Box 6 Example of implicit social exclusion

Table 1 Number of interviews, focus group discussions and participants in total
Table 2 Characteristics of monastic teachers
Table 3 The 4Rs analysis of monastic schools for social cohesion
Abstract
Burmese society is known for its rich ethnic and religious diversity; however, its social fabric remains interwoven with inter-religious and ethno-state tensions. The nexus between the fields of education and social cohesion in Myanmar remains unexplored, despite the governments’ promises to include peace values in the school curriculum. Likewise, the roles teachers adopt and the ways they exercise their agency in conflict affected areas remain unacknowledged and undertheorized. Hence, through a multi-scalar approach, this thesis examines the part monastic schools play in social cohesion on a national (macro) level, while outlining different roles monastic teachers adopt and ways they choose to exercise their agency for community-based (micro level) social cohesion. Data collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives of education and peacebuilding organizations is analysed through the lens of the 4Rs framework of redistribution, reconciliation, recognition, and reconciliation. For the micro analysis of teacher agency, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with monastic teachers, focus groups, non-participatory, and participatory activities in four monastic schools in Yangon and Mandalay.

The findings show that monastic schools’ play a complex and contested role for social cohesion and remain embedded in national education structures that promote Buddhist Bamar identity through education governance and curriculum. Monastic schools also fail to fully recognize diversity and integrate ethnic and religious minorities in the school curriculum, extracurricular activities, and their infrastructure/environment. On a micro level, teachers adopt a range of positive and negative roles for social cohesion, which are often contradictory and contingent to the context and structure of monastic schools.

Key words: Monastic teachers – Teacher Agency – Monastic Schools – Social Cohesion – Myanmar
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1. Introduction

1.1. First Impressions from the Fieldwork: Inter-faith Rally and Aung San Suu Kyi’s Speech

“We do not want Myanmar to be a nation divided by religious beliefs or ethnicity, or political ideology. We all have the right to our diverse identities, and we all have the right to strive and to fulfil our lives in the ways which we believe are right. But we also have to work together, because we belong to one nation. And as we belong to one nation, we also belong to this world. It is by cooperating only, will our world go forward.”

(Aung San Suu Kyi 2017 - Speech on National Reconciliation and Peace)

To begin with, I would like to describe two events that took place upon my arrival to Myanmar in September 2017. This was one of the times when crisis in the Rakhine state had reached its' peak, leaving international headlines filled with reports on communal violence and growing numbers of Rohingya people seeking refuge in Bangladesh. Ironically, or expectedly, on 19th of September the State counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi held a diplomatic briefing and gave a speech on the governments’ efforts on peace and national reconciliation. As a representative of the National League for Democracy (NLD), she reaffirmed the leading party's commitment to act on two priorities of their manifesto, namely national reconciliation, and the peace process (Thu Thu Aung 2017). During this diplomatic briefing, the State counsellor claimed that ‘…we are also trying to promote inter-communal religious harmony, by engaging inter-faith groups’, as well as ‘new curriculum is to be introduced in schools with a focus on moral and civic ideas, and peace and stability.’ (Aung San Suu Kyi 2017). The government clearly recognizes the urgency of acting against the backdrop of decades of civil war and the exacerbation of inter-religious tension in the past year. In addition, the need for the revision and alignment of the school curriculum and practices has been advocated by numerous national and international organizations, including Mote Oo, Save the Children, Search for Common Ground, among others.
Following the counsellors' speech, the State's first interfaith rally in Yangon marked the month of October 2017 in Myanmar, where Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim leaders gathered to call for unity and peace against the backdrop of recent communal tensions. Despite the optimistic spirit of this event, local education experts remained critical of the governments' promises, claiming that 'This is only political propaganda. They are doing this just for electoral calculation and just to reduce the tension from the outside world. Peace cannot just come from pray from religious leaders. Peace is raising people's awareness. So, the government, the NLD government brings religion into politics. And this is what I mean, this is not the right solution to reduce tension in the country. This is not the root cause. The root cause is for many years, people are under the pressure under dictatorship and lack of education and lack of understanding the differences, so that destroys peace. So, what it means to create peace, when to construct peace it means education for younger generation to understand peace and to respect each other.' (Kaung Kyaw, local education specialist)

As a result, regard towards political gatherings, prayers, and promises for peace and reconciliation remain infused with mistrust and lack conviction in the eyes of Burmese people. Partaking in these events and engaging in local discussions about ongoing conflicts, left me with more question marks than answers. Upon arriving to a monastic school in Mandalay, a foreign volunteer teacher that has been living in Myanmar for several years asked me what the topic of my research was and when I responded, replied 'Peacebuilding in monastic schools? Do you mean conflict-building?'

Based on these first impressions, my fieldwork began with even more open questions than initially expected. This thesis is a result of my personal and academic curiosity in addressing a few of these contested issues that permeate Burmese society nowadays.

1.2. Multifaceted Nature of Conflict in Myanmar

This chapter briefly sheds light on the complex dynamics of conflict in Myanmar, though within this thesis, I mainly focus on the ethnic and religious aspects of conflict. From a political perspective, Myanmar has been occupied by the British from 1886 up until 1948 (Henderson 2010). Burmese nationalism was strongly revived in the period of independence and continues to permeate Burmese society to this day. The instability of the newly independent country set a fruitful ground for the central military to exert greater influence over the country, eventually leading to military takeover in 1962 (Higgins et al 2016). The oppressive military junta followed the policies of deliberate isolation and centralized the economy, resulting in complete disconnection from international markets and community, and subsequently extreme poverty (Henderson 2010). Furthermore, General Ne Win, the head of the military declared that 'Federalism is impossible. It will destroy the Union' (TNI 2013, 3 in Higgins et al 2016). The narrative that federalism would erode the spirit of national unity intentionally denied ethnic and religious plurality and resulted in the enactment of restrictive and oppressive policies.

The concern that federalism would result in a weakened nation state was countered by promoting a discourse of national unity, which denied cultural and religious plurality and allowed the enactment of increasingly restrictive and oppressive policies by the ruling junta. These policies combined political and economic power for the military at the expense of civil liberties and resulted in both political and ethnic resistance of Burmese people (Holliday 2011, 59). The ethnic conflicts are therefore intrinsically linked to the pro-democracy struggles; however, these interlinkages are not always acknowledged by either internal or external actors. Moreover, the gradual achievement of collective civil rights by ethnic
groups are not necessarily conducive to the achievement of broader social and economic rights and ultimately to democracy.

Ethnic conflict therefore stems from the long-lasting repression of minorities’ cultural rights, religious freedom, as well as the lack of inclusion in political processes (TNI 2015). As a result, areas inhabited with ethnic minorities remain until today economically and socially underdeveloped. Myanmar’s population counts to around 52 million people, of which two thirds comprise the majority Bamar ethnic group. As one of the world’s ethnically diverse countries, Myanmar counts 135 different ethnic minorities. Shan, Karen (Kayin), Mon and Rakhine are the biggest ethnic groups and mainly they populate and control the border areas (Elisha Sawe, 2018). Repressive processes and policies of 'Burmanization' during the military regime were met with resentment by ethnic groups, which resulted in revolt against the government and deep social segregation (South and Lall, 2016). For decades, ethnic army groups (EAGs) have been calling for political self-determination, with a final objective to gain federal autonomy within a multi-ethnic Union of Myanmar (Smith 1999 in South and Lall 2016). In 2011, the peace process reached a milestone when most (not all) EAGs and Tatmadaw¹ made significant progress in negotiations and eventually signed a comprehensive Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015 (South and Lall 2016). Besides the demands for political autonomy, tensions have manifested in the education sector as well, including the right to use minority languages in ethnic and state schools (at least at the primary level) as one of the most contested issues (ibid.). Despite the signed NCA in 2015, Myanmar has relapsed back into active violence, marking clashes between Tatmadaw and Karen National Liberation Army in spring 2018 (The Nation, 2018).

The most grievous violation of human rights is the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Rohingya that has been taking place in the Rakhine state. The crisis culminated in 2017 with nearly 700,000 (and growing daily) people fleeing to Bangladesh (BBC, 2018). Rohingya people are one of the ethnic minorities of Muslim Arab descendent that have lived in Myanmar for generations, nevertheless, they are denied the right to citizenship and were even intentionally excluded from the census in 2014 (ibid.). The government also refuses to use the term ‘Rohingya’ and refers to them as ‘Bengali’ - i.e. illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (Aung Myint, 2014). The Rakhine crisis is one of the most extreme cases of inter-religious tension that continues to permeate Burmese society. Furthermore, Buddhism has been historically interwoven with Burmese identity, and the slogan ‘to be Burmese is to be Buddhist’ is widely known and used among many nationalist movements (Schober 2017). The dominant role of Buddhist philosophy has historical roots and was reaffirmed with policies of “Burmanization” during the military regime, which used Bamar ethnicity and Buddhist religion as the foundation of national unification (Grey & Roos 2014). This resulted in the marginalization of alternative ethnic and religious identities (ibid.).

The marginalization and discrimination of Muslim minorities is wide spread across the country. Based on conversations with informants, the conflict between Buddhists and Muslim minorities appeared to be a highly sensitive topic. While most participants were open to discuss conflicts related to resources and clashes between ethnic groups and Tatmadaw, very few were willing to talk about Muslims and the Rakhine crisis. This interreligious conflict is strongly linked with the fear of the Islamization of the country, leaving Muslims, as well as Mosques and Madrassas viewed with suspicion (Grey & Roos 2014). In addition, rumours of Muslim men marrying Buddhist women with the aim of conversion to

¹ Tatmadaw is another name for Myanmar’s State army.
Buddhism and increasing the Muslim population are spreading across the country. These rumours have been implicitly addressed with the implementation of marriage laws that restrict inter-religious marriages (*ibid.* ) and in consequence fuel anti-Islamic sentiments.

1.3. Social cohesion

Against the backdrop of past and ongoing socio-ethnic and inter-religious hostilities in Myanmar, issues of peace, social cohesion and reconciliation are receiving more attention and coming to the fore in academic and applied science (Higgins et al 2016; South and Lall 2016), as well in the work of local and international development organizations (Search for Common Ground, Thabyay, Mote Oo, among others). A report issued by Search for Common Ground emphasizes the necessity ‘*to create and sustain a cohesive society*’ in Myanmar and to include social cohesion as an ‘*integral component of policies, strategies and programs, to manage conflict, build peace and democratic governance, and develop the country in an equitable and inclusive manner*’ (SFCG 2017, 4).

In a broader sense, the notion of social cohesion has gained popularity in policy-making spheres and academia, as a ‘buzzword’ as well as a highly complex theoretical concept (Council of Europe 2001; Langer et al 2015; Jenson 2010; Chan et al 2006). If we look at the everyday meaning of the word ‘*coherence*’ or ‘*cohesion*’, the Oxford dictionary (2017) defines it as ‘*the action or fact of forming a united whole*’ and as ‘*the stickiness of particles*’. Translating this definition to the world of social science, social cohesion would then refer to the state or process of how people ‘*cohere*’ or ‘*stick*’ together, which depends on their state of mind as well as behaviour (Chan et al 2006).

Institutions such as The Council of Europe coined the idea of social cohesion as ‘*a concept that includes values and principles which aim to ensure that all citizens, without discrimination and on an equal footing, have access to fundamental social and economic rights. Social cohesion is a flagship concept which constantly reminds us of the need to be collectively attentive to, and aware of, any kind of discrimination, inequality, marginality, and exclusion*’ (Council of Europe 2001,3). OECD claims that ‘*a cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation. It entails three major dimensions: fostering cohesion by building networks of relationships, trust and identity between different groups; fighting discrimination, exclusion and excessive inequalities; and enabling upward social mobility*’ (OECD in Langer et al 2015). The strong emphasis of social cohesion within the political sphere can be attributed to the connection made between social cohesion and economic growth and political stability (Berger-Schmitt 2002; Easterly et al 2006). The economic development of a country such as Myanmar is certainly important, however it is also crucial to acknowledge the importance of embedding social cohesion within the education sector for sustainable development and peacebuilding (Novelli and Sayed 2016). Despite the increasing attention, the notion of social cohesion is continuing to receive, it remains a complex concept without a clear-cut definition. This complexity is evident in the wide spectrum of definitions and interpretations of the term (Berger-Schmitt 2002), which I discuss further in subchapter 3.1. of the theoretical framework.

1.4. Monastic Education Sector

Buddhist monasteries have been providing education since the early 11th century when they served as religious institutions and were the sole providers of education. During the period of colonization
(1824-1948), the British introduced a competitive education system and monastic schools were downgraded and have taken a subordinated role ever since (Tin and Stenning, 2015). Nowadays, monastic schools² cater as the main education provider for children who have difficulties accessing the state education system, either due to financial constraints or because of the remoteness of their communities (Zobrist 2010; BIM&MEDG 2015). Furthermore, monastic schools are open and accessible to students, regardless of their race and religion, which in result brings children from different social groups together and in the long run holds the potential to contribute to social cohesion (Higgins et al 2016).

Although the monastic education system plays an important role in providing education for over 275,000 children and has been recognized as an institution of formal learning, it remains largely marginalized within the national education landscape. For a long period of time, the monastic education sector was recognized merely as a parallel or complementary education actor alongside the state schools. Alongside international pressure to meet global educational targets and the governments' inability to offer proper primary education in all areas across the country, monastic school have become more acknowledged and started to gain some symbolic financial support from the state.

Nevertheless, monastic schools continue to face challenges of financial funding, as well as meaningful recognition and political representation, especially in ongoing education reform processes. Relying merely on donations of well-wishers and their communities, monastic schools remain severely underfunded and often unable to provide decent salaries to their teachers. To illustrate, while teachers working in state schools earn up to 150,000 Burmese Kyat (91,2 €) per month, monastic teachers³ receive on average 40,000 Kyat (24,3 €) per month (Tin and Stenning 2015). What is more, due to the lack of resources, approximately 14 % of teachers work on a voluntary basis and do not receive financial compensation for their work (BIM&MEDG 2014). As a result, monastic schools face difficulties with retaining teachers, since they cannot compete with salaries offered in government schools. Often, after gaining a certain level of training and expertise, teachers tend to leave monastic schools to pursue careers in state or private schools (BIM&MEDG 2014; Tin and Stenning 2015).

To summarize, the monastic education sector and teachers face inequalities in relation to representation, recognition, and redistribution which are known as the three crucial dimensions of the 4Rs’ theory for sustainable peacebuilding (Novelli et al 2015), which will be described in the theoretical framework section. Unwillingness to recognize monastic education as one of the main pillars of Myanmar’s education system, on equal terms with the state schools, highlights and aggravates multiple issues of social inequality, that can potentially lead to relapse into (violent) conflict (Higgins et al 2016). In essence, issues regarding inequality that pervade Myanmar’s education system

² Buddhist monasteries that operate as monastic schools typically offer three different education trajectories: mainstream schools (follow the government curriculum, open for all children), study of Pali language and traditional text of Theravada Buddhism (mainly for monks and novices), and Dhamma school (Sunday religious school, open to all students). In this thesis I use the term ‘monastic schools’, I refer to the mainstream schools, that are governed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture (Morac), and partially by the Ministry of Education (MoE).
³ In this thesis, the term of ‘monastic teachers’ refers to personnel at monastic schools responsible for education of students, including female, male and monk teachers.
and the subordinated role of the monastic education sector have the potential to directly or indirectly impact the country’s peacebuilding process.

2. Positioning this Study in Relevant Academic Debates
To begin with, there is a general lack of academic and practical research on the monastic education sector within Myanmar. Reports that are mainly produced by state institutions and international organizations rarely address monastic education as their primary subject of inquiry. For example, *Education for All National Review* acknowledges the important role the monastic education sector plays in providing UPE (Universal Primary Education) and describes it as an ‘*alternative to formal education for poor children*’ (MoE 2014, 13). Nevertheless, the report is limited in reporting the role monastic schools play in terms of access to and quality of monastic education for disadvantaged children, while failing to address the myriad of issues relating to inequality, such as the lack of infrastructure in monastic schools, inequality in financial redistribution in comparison to state schools etc. Likewise, reports such as ‘*Situation Analysis of the Monastic Education Sector in Myanmar*’ (Tin and Stenning 2015) and ‘*Baseline Study on Monastic Education*’ (BIM&MEDG Institute 2014) recognize the critical role the monastic education sector plays in providing education for over 275,000 children who come from disadvantaged and marginalized communities, or live in areas where the state fails to establish the necessary education infrastructure. These reports serve as a comprehensive assessment of the monastic education sector, covering the main issues that monastic teachers face in relation to teacher training, lack of resources for their salaries, limitations to professional development, etc. Nevertheless, these reports do not explore the potential role monastic schools could play within the processes of social cohesion.

While the role of teachers as crucial actors within and a significant driving force behind successful education systems and students’ performance has been widely recognized among scholars, the multiple social roles they take up remain rather unexplored (Horner et al 2015; Rivkin et al 2005; Westbrook et al 2013). Barber and Mourshed (2007) summarize the importance of teachers by stating that ‘the quality of an education system cannot succeed the quality of its teachers’ (13). Particularly within Burmese society, monks and teachers are highly esteemed, as it is often said that ‘*In Myanmar culture, there are three kinds of people worthy of being worshiped: monks are the first, before parents and teachers*’ (Gil 2008, 4). Teachers are also often perceived as substitute parents with great authority, which places a lot of responsibilities in their hands in transmitting certain values and beliefs to their students (*ibid*). Moreover, they often take the role of community leaders who give opinions on local issues, mediate disputes as well as provide religious and moral support (Novelli and Sayed 2016). Hence, the importance of teachers as potential actors for change, and key contributors towards a socially cohesive society should not be underestimated.

Additionally, in the past years, scholars have begun to devote attention to the diverse range of roles teachers in conflict affected areas can play, acknowledging their potential to exercise their agency in positive as well as negative ways (Horner et al 2015; Higgins et al 2016; Novelli and Sayed 2016). Higgins et al (2016) outline how teachers perceive themselves in myriad ways, namely as peacebuilders, community leaders, as overworked, and as agents performing a noble service. Horner et al (2015) directly discuss how teachers’ roles in peacebuilding depends on their perceptions of

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4 The monastic education sector/system refers to basic (primary, and a few secondary) education schools operated and managed by monasteries and nunneries (Tin and Stenning 2015).
themselves as well as how others perceive them. They can take up a broad range of roles interchangeably, and act as transformative agents for social cohesion, as well seen as perpetrators of violence (ibid.). In addition, Novelli and Sayed (2016) explore various roles of teachers in several conflict affected countries, including Myanmar. Nevertheless, the role of monastic schools and teachers in relation to social cohesion remains unclear and contentious, especially against the backdrop of growing Buddhist extremism in the past few years\(^5\). On the one hand, monastic schools provide an open and affordable learning environment for disadvantaged children regardless of their race and religion that can positively impact national education outcomes and the social inclusion of marginalized groups (Higgins et al 2016). On the other hand, Christian and Muslim children who join the schooling system are often encouraged to convert to Buddhism, which opens the question whether certain monastic schools might have an indoctrinating agenda behind them (Higgins et al 2016; Lorch 2008).

Nevertheless, while aforementioned reports engage in discourse on teachers’ role in peacebuilding from different angles, the monastic education sector and monastic teachers do not seem to be a prominent point of their inquiry. Most importantly, their explorations lack direct engagement with monastic teachers themselves, which shows an absence of perception on the role they play as teachers, how they exercise their agency and how they position themselves in relation to the process of social cohesion. Despite the meaningful work of teachers, within and beyond classroom walls, their role in educating future generations, especially within conflict-affected areas, remains largely unacknowledged. For that reason, this research aims to acknowledge the efforts and struggles of individual teachers and offer a channel for their voices to be heard and appreciated.

### 2.1. Research Questions

The research is guided by the following research question:

*Within the context of Buddhist monastic schools, how do monastic teachers perceive and exercise their roles and agency in supporting Myanmar’s community-based process of social cohesion?*

To fully comprehend these roles and agency, the following sub questions explore the micro dynamics of teachers’ agency (SQ1+SQ2), while acknowledging the importance of their environment and ongoing macro processes within the education system (SQ3):

**Sub question 1 (SQ1): What roles do monastic teachers adopt to exercise their agency for community-based social cohesion?**

**Sub question 2 (SQ2): What are monastic teachers’ motivations for their work?**

**Sub question 2 (SQ3): What role do monastic schools play in Myanmar’s national process of social cohesion?**

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\(^5\) Buddhist nationalism gained momentum in the past few years with the rise of discriminatory movements, namely ‘969’ and ‘MaBaTa’. These movements present themselves as peaceful grassroot movements and protectors of Buddhist religion (Gravers 2016; McPherson 2017), however they negatively impact on the growing inter-religious tensions within the county. Their passionate dedication to the protection of national identity and the ‘Sangha’ (monk community) is mainly based on irrational fear of growth and threat of the Muslim minority in the country (McPherson 2017).
3. Theoretical Framework

This study is partially driven by established theoretical frameworks and empirical insights in the fields of education, peacebuilding, and teacher agency. However, it also acknowledges that there is a lack of - and limited access to local, Burmese academic knowledge on these topics that could offer more accurate insights into the phenomena under this study. Hence, this thesis follows certain theoretical frameworks, yet avoids too deterministic application of their assumptions, with the aim of offering space for local perceptions and experiences to emerge that do not always perfectly fit into conceptualizations of Western concepts, such as social cohesion and (teacher) agency.

For that reason, pragmatism has been chosen as a guiding philosophical paradigm for this thesis. Going beyond the initial assumption of pragmatism as an approach that follows the principle of ‘what works best’, pragmatism fits this study because it claims that research designs should be chosen and shaped on the basis of individual research projects and their circumstances (Savin-Baden and Major 2013). Pragmatism therefore does not strictly adhere to any particular epistemological or ontological assumptions (Grix 2010) and encourages researchers to adopt philosophical approaches and choose methods that yield best outcomes, depending on the nature, research problem, and circumstances of the study (Pansiri 2005).

Moreover, pragmatism recognizes the tentative and fallible nature of theory and concepts and supports an empirical approach to research (Ormerod 2006). In this sense, pragmatism places theory in the service of practice, thus giving it a less exalted role than usual (ibid.). In line with an empirical approach to research, Dewey, one of the founding fathers of pragmatism supports the idea of learning and developing knowledge through experimentation and experience (Dewey 1937 in Ormerod 2006). Believing that knowledge claims cannot be made without experience, Dewey encouraged the incorporation of participation and experimentation in research inquiries. Pragmatism therefore sets the foundation for a more holistic and eclectic research process that suits the understudied and rather fluid nature of concepts such as social cohesion and teacher agency, especially in the conflict-affected context of Myanmar. To meet this objective, this thesis avoids the over-deterministic application of (mainly Western) theoretical assumptions on teacher agency and social cohesion and offers space for local experiences and knowledge claims to surface and acknowledges their potential to deviate from established knowledge claims.

The ambiguity of the theoretical concepts studied in this research, namely social cohesion and teacher agency was reaffirmed during the fieldwork period as well. In addition, a gap that emerged between the academic knowledge and contextualized empirical knowledge in the context of monastic schools became even more evident. Therefore, this thesis applies a post-structuralist lens of inquiry to explore...
this space of ambiguity in understanding and interpreting concepts of social cohesion and teacher agency.

Although not bound to one definition, Harcourt defines post-structuralism 'as a style of critical reasoning that focuses on the moment of slippage in our systems of meaning as a way to identify—right there, in that ambiguous space—the ethical choices that we make, whether in our writings or in everyday life, when we overcome the ambiguity and move from indeterminacy to certainty of belief in an effort to understand, interpret, or shape our social environment.' (2007, 1). Post-structuralism therefore offers space for analysing these gaps in the ‘meaning making’ of slippery concepts that cannot yet be fully rationalized by existing knowledge, neither by limited or non-existing local and empirical understanding.

Post-structuralism argues against scientific objectivity and universality and focuses on the deconstruction of established binaries in modern thinking - black/white, female/male, structure/agency (Bista 2015). It neither believes in the universality of structures of meaning, nor does it believe that they reflect the truth about people or society. In response, post-structuralism focuses on ambiguities and gaps in systems of meaning and finds meaning in these spaces (Harcourt 2007). Instead of aspiring to reach the point of regularity or continuity, this approach acknowledges fragmentation, contradiction, and discontinuity in finding meaning (Davies 1991). Consequently, this flips the essence of traditional processes of inquiry – the main idea is not to find regularity, but to acknowledge the fragmented nature of social phenomena and to continuously probe the meaning behind 'discovered regularity' (Harcourt 2007). Although this thesis does to a certain point aim to discover regularities (mostly on a macro level), it adheres to its main objective, namely considering teachers as a heterogenous group of individuals with varied experiences and unpacking the complexities of teacher agency within the environment of monastic schools.

As mentioned earlier, post-structuralism goes beyond dualisms of any kind by supporting the idea of breaking free from established dualities as constitutive features of modern discourse (Davies 1991). This approach therefore aims to deconstruct well established dualisms of modern thought, including feminine and masculine, conscious-unconscious, structure and agency. This deconstruction fits into this study because it aims to move beyond the ongoing discourse on structure-agency in social science. Being caught in the discourse of one depending on another, or the 'chicken-egg' causality dilemma, post-structuralism enables the researcher to approach both as separate yet intertwined analytical entities. This tenet is further unpacked through the ecological approach to teacher agency in subchapter 3.2.

In terms of agency, post-structuralism challenges the dominant humanistic and individualistic discourses on human agency that remain framed within masculine and elitist understanding of agency as a human feature of selected few (Davies 1991). Davies continues to explain that 'those who are generally not constituted as agentic, such as women, children, natives, and the insane are, by definition within that model, not fully human. Agency, for them, is the exception, rather than the rule.' (Davies 1991, 42). In addition, this rational and rather active perception of agency fails to acknowledge or recognize normative, interactive notion of agency (Benson in Davies 1991). In this sense, agentic acts remain framed as purely individual acts (ibid.). Post-structuralism moves beyond this individualistic, action-oriented perception of agency as a human feature of selected few, and acknowledges the normative, interactive and relational nature of agency, and various ways of exercising agency and gives equal credit to unnoticed and perhaps anomalous forms of expression as well.
3.1. Social Cohesion

The ambiguity and ‘fluidity’ of the notion of social cohesion can be noticed in the existing body of knowledge regarding the concept, which offers a wide range of interpretations. While some authors approach social cohesion as a certain ‘state of affairs’ (Chan et al 2006), others (Jenson 1998; Berger-Schmitt 2002) perceive it as a process or set of processes. Jenson claims that ‘social cohesion is a set of social processes that help instil in individuals the sense of belonging to the same community and the feeling that they are recognized as members of that community.’ (Jenson 1998, 4). This research adopts the view of social cohesion as a process, rather than a ‘state of affairs’ or a desired end target.

Viewing social cohesion as a process allows for a more dynamic perception of the concept, one that acknowledges that there is no ideal state or ‘maximum’ amount of social cohesion. This point is particularly relevant in studies carried out in the context of Myanmar, where approaching social cohesion as an ideal state would be a rather utopian aspiration due to enduring inter-ethnic and inter-religious (Muslim-Buddhist) hostilities. Social cohesion is therefore defined as a continuous process that requires awareness, constant investment, and effort from multiple social groups and individuals.

Approaching cohesion as a process acknowledges the fact that efforts and actions for contributing to a more socially cohesive society take place at different levels of society – amongst individuals, between different social groups, and territorial units (McCracken 1998). Langer et al (2016) recognize that the concept of social cohesion can be applied to a region, sub-region, country, and community. Similar ideas echo in Myanmar, as Search for Common Ground (SFCG) stresses that ‘social cohesion is not the responsibility of the Union government alone; local governments, civil society, non-state actors, media and the people of Myanmar all have important roles to play in shifting cultural norms and creating a public consciousness that recognizes the many commonalities shared between diverse groups.’ (2017,4).

Community-Based Social Cohesion

As outlined in the introductory chapter (1.3.), social cohesion is interpreted in numerous ways. Nevertheless, Scheifer and Noll (2016) claim that these definitions share much more commonalities than disparities. Drawing from a comprehensive literature overview, they suggest an essentialist (‘slim’) approach to social cohesion as opposed to a ‘catch all’ conceptualization. This approach frames social cohesion within three overlapping dimensions, i.e. social relations, connectedness, and orientation towards common good (Figure 1). Although this approach covers multiple levels of social cohesion, this thesis remains limited to exploring social cohesion on a micro level i.e. local, community-based processes of social cohesion that takes place within monastic schools and their communities.

The first category of social relations lies at the core of social cohesion and captures the strength and quality of people’s relationships and bonds with others – including closer relationships with friends, family, and the wider community (Scheifer and Noll 2016). If we specify it even further, this dimension looks at relations and connections between various social units, i.e. individuals, groups, associations, and territorial groups (Berger-Schmitt and Noll 2000). This relational aspect of social cohesion is essential for this research because it specifically explores how teachers engage with their own community – predominantly composed of Buddhist Bamar, as well as their engagement with people from other religious and ethnic groups.
Furthermore, this dimension includes the following subcategories: participation, trust, and mutual tolerance. On a local level, participation focuses on the civic engagement of individuals with their communities and associations, which reflects a sense of belonging, solidarity, and willingness for cooperation in the pursuit of collective ideas and goals (Berger-Schmitt and Noll 2000). Translating this component of social relations into the context of this research entails emphasis on teachers’ perceptions on their place and participation in activities within schools and the wider community. However, it is important to note teachers’ engagement takes different forms that bring positive or negative effects on social cohesion. Trust and mutual tolerance are other components that determine the quality of social relations and level of social cohesion. Special attention is given not only to recognition and inclusion of minorities, but also to attitudes of individuals in relation to acceptance and trust across different social groups.

Connectedness is the second dimension of social cohesion that considers the importance of identification and sense of belonging or feelings of attachment to a range of social entities, including a group, nation state, transnational entity etc. (Scheifer and Noll 2016). Western literature tends to strongly emphasize geographical identifications and perceive ethnicity and religion as smaller identity-establishing social units with the strong potential for social fragmentation (ibid.). In line with similar thought, Cheong et al (2007) add that it is important to not only look into networks within a certain group (or community), but also relations and ties that go beyond a certain social group. Within the context of Myanmar where religious and ethnic belonging play a central role in identity formation and group affinity, this research pays special attention to the ‘bonding aspect’ as well as the ‘bridging aspect’ of social cohesion (ibid.).

Orientation towards the common good is the last dimension of Scheifer and Noll’s (2007) essentialist conceptualization of social cohesion, that is partially adopted for the purpose of this research. Framed
from a rather Western, democratic perception of social cohesion, they claim that a socially cohesive society demands ‘acceptance of the social order and compliance to social rules and norms’ (ibid., 549). However, within the context of Myanmar, this dimension should be viewed through a critical lens that considers the possibility that certain social groups hold a privileged position in forming social rules and norms. Therefore, emphasis lies in the individual’s sense of responsibility for acting for the common good that stretches beyond the interests of their own social (ethnic or religious) group.

Although this research remains focused on community-based social cohesion, monastic schools and teachers do not function in a vacuum, but within broader social, economic, and political structures that influence their actions. These structures form a dynamic environment with enabling and limiting forces that influence the process of social cohesion. Aligned with the principles of the ecological approach to teacher agency, to fully comprehend different ways teachers express their agency, we need to understand their environment also as a space of manoeuvre that they operate in. For that reason, this study also ‘zooms’ out from the local level and situates monastic schools within the fields of education and social cohesion. This role is conceptualized and analysed through the lens of the 4Rs framework (Novelli et al 2015), which is explained in the following subsection.

The 4Rs Framework for Sustainable Peacebuilding/Social Cohesion

Despite the extensive knowledge on social cohesion, the concept remains rather ‘open’ with different connotations that depend on the purpose of the study, identity factors, cultural, social, and political dynamics of a given context (SFCG 2017). Therefore, for the purpose of this study the essentialist framework of social cohesion is complemented by the 4Rs framework for sustainable peacebuilding. As mentioned earlier, there is a tendency in social research to focus on a ‘macro-view’ of agency that often ignores local and specific circumstances; or on a ‘micro-view’ of over-individualized perceptions of agency, which remains oblivious to issues of structure and the specific context (Fuchs 2001 in Priestley et al 2015). While the essentialist approach brings in a strong inter-relational character, the 4Rs framework places more emphasis on the structural components of social cohesion. Therefore, the essentialist framework remains at the core of understanding teachers’ roles and agency for social cohesion (micro level), while the 4Rs serves as an analytical tool for situating monastic schools within the nexus of education and social cohesion and depicting the structural terrain in which monastic teachers function and exercise their agency.

Firstly, notions of social cohesion and peacebuilding have often been used interchangeably in conflict-affected environments, as a kind of synonym for a society based on equality, strong social capital and social mobility (Novelli and Sayed 2016; Cox et al 2014). For example, UNICEF’s PBEA programmes treat the notion of social cohesion as a kind of a synonym or proxy for peacebuilding, especially in countries with local sensitivities to the language of peace and peacebuilding (Novelli and Sayed 2016), such is Myanmar. In addition to academic literature, international organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank and the UNDP recognize that the crucial factor for post-conflict recovery and the establishment of peaceful coexistence lies in strengthening inter-group relations, as well as re-establishing trust between these groups and the state as well (Cox and Sisk 2016; UNDP 2009). These conceptual overlaps between social cohesion and peacebuilding allow for the flexibility to draw certain aspects from both fields. While an essentialist approach to social cohesion, as described in the previous chapter, outlines core dimensions of the concept, it remains underdeveloped in terms of the peacebuilding aspect of social cohesion and lacks a clear connection to the field of education.
For this reason, I also draw from the 4Rs framework for sustainable peacebuilding (Novelli et al 2015). Developed by Novelli, Lopes Cardozo and Smith (2015), the 4Rs framework builds on an established body of literature on social justice and peace, linking the work of Nancy Fraser, Johan Galtung and Paul Lederach (Novelli et al 2015). Building on Fraser’s work on social justice, this framework positions education’s transformative role as directly connected to and embedded with social justice and processes of social transformation (ibid.). Fraser claims that a socially just society demands the equal redistribution of resources and opportunities, political representation, and socio-cultural recognition of different social groups (Fraser 2005). Through this social lens the 4Rs framework adds the fourth dimension that is crucial for sustainable peacebuilding – reconciliation.

The first dimension of redistribution is concerned with issues of equity and non-discrimination in education access, resources, and outcomes for different groups within a society, with special focus on disadvantaged and marginalized groups (Higgins et al 2016). The second R, Recognition, addresses the challenges of social differences and the educational content in terms of language, history, politics, religion, culture, and ethnicity. Focus is given to how schools’ environment and curriculum recognize and include different cultural, religious, and ethnic identities (Novelli et al 2015). Representation, the third R, aims at encouraging the participation of different social groups within the national education policy making process and in reforms (Higgins et al 2016). The last ‘R’ stands for reconciliation, which emphasizes the importance of education’s role in dealing with historical memory, processes of forgiving and healing, and building trust between social groups (Novelli et al 2015).

3.2. Teacher Agency

The notion of agency has been widely addressed and debated in social science (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984; Archer 1988; Emirbayer and Mische 1998), nevertheless its theorization remains elusive and contested. The contested nature of agency is clearly visible within the discourse on structure and agency. For example, Emile Durkheim (1912) argued that structure dominates agency in a sense that social structures control social life and regulate individual’s behaviour. On the other side, Weberian theorists view individual agents as central to social life as they claim that social structures emerge from individuals’ actions (Novelli and Sayed 2016). In response to this debate, Emirbayer and Mische claim that the main problem with the structure-agency debate remains the failure to distinguish agency as ‘an analytical category in its own right’ (1998, 963).

Furthermore, Fuchs (2001) claims that there is a tendency in social science research to focus on a ‘macro-view’ of agency that often ignores local and specific circumstances; or take a ‘micro-view’ of over-individualized perceptions of agency, which remain oblivious to issues of structure and specific context. As a result, throughout the course of time, sociologists overcame this binary by depicting structures as products of actors (agency), who are aware of the ‘regulations’ of system (structure) but realize that they can influence and change ‘regulations’ that govern social life (Novelli and Sayed 2016). Nevertheless, this perception of agency still does not offer a clear, analytically applicable and context sensitive conceptualization of agency.

Another problematic aspect of existing scholarly work on agency is the perception of agency as an ‘innate capacity’ of individuals that certain people possess, and others do not (Priestley et al 2015). This perception offers an over-individualistic view on agency as human capacity, that people possess to varying degrees, merely depending on their personal attributes (ibid.). Perceiving agency as a capacity of only certain individuals offers a rather isolated view of agency and poses danger in terms of neglecting the environment and its influences on exercising agency. Furthermore, overly
individualistic views of agency seem closer to Western norms of independent individualism, that cannot always be directly translated to the context of Burmese society where collectivism tends to be more appreciated than individualism. On a similar note, from a Western perspective, agency is often wrongly conflated with action, however these two should be treated and analysed separately (ibid.), especially when considering the long history of political and military oppression, as well as persistent religious norms that permeate Burmese society.

In response to these problematic points in discourses on agency and the necessity of adopting a view on teacher agency that could be applied in the local context of Burmese monastic schools, this research adopts an ecological approach to teacher agency, formed by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015). Building on pragmatist philosophy and Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) work on agency, the ecological approach views agency as an interplay of the individual’s capacity and conditions of the environment through which the agency is enacted (Priestley et al 2015). As defined by Biesta and Tedder: ‘This concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment (so that) the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors as they come together in a particular and, in a sense, always unique situations’ (2007, 137).

One of the core premises of this approach lies in its deviation from perceiving agency as a capacity or possession of certain individuals, but rather as an emergent phenomenon, something that is achieved by an individual, through the interplay of their personal capacities and resources, constraints, and supportive forces within the environment in which the individual functions (Priestley et al 2015). From this perspective, agency is treated as a ‘chordial triad’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), consisting of three dimensions, namely the iterational dimension, the practical-evaluative, and the projective. This three-dimensional model of teacher agency emphasizes the relational and temporal aspects of this phenomenon and enables researchers to understand how agency is achieved by teachers, in certain contexts and situations, by considering the individual, as well as cultural and structural factors. Although this approach emphasizes the temporal aspect of teacher agency, in meeting the objective of this study, I stay focused mainly on the relational aspect. Although motivational drivers of teachers’ work are inherently related to their motivational drivers (from the past) and aspirations for the future, these remain framed as influencing and shaping factors of different ways teachers ‘achieve’ agency in the present moment.
3.3. Conceptual Scheme

![Conceptual Scheme Diagram]

**Figure 2: Conceptual scheme.**

This figure depicts the theoretical foundations of this study and ways how different theoretical components relate and/or complement each other. From a broader view, processes of social cohesion take place on different levels and this study acknowledges processes on both the national and local level. The process of social cohesion at a national level (blue colour) remains framed within the dimensions of the 4Rs framework, namely recognition, representation, redistribution, and reconciliation. These four dimensions are applied to explain the role monastic schools play in social cohesion, setting a clear ground for better understanding the environment in which teachers operate. Social cohesion at a local level (green colour) is depicted from an essentialist perspective, which defines social relations, sense of belonging (connectedness), and orientation towards common good as main elements. Monastic teachers are at the heart of this study, adopting different roles for teachers and how they intentionally or non-intentionally act as agents for social cohesion. Though the lens of the ecological approach to teacher agency is adopted, this study also acknowledges that teachers and their actions are shaped by their environment, existing structures, and power relations as well. Nevertheless, teachers exercise their agency by taking up different roles, which are driven by a wide range of motivations. By adopting positive and negative roles, in some cases simultaneously, teachers influence and shape their environment and directly impact processes of social cohesion on a local level, and indirectly social cohesion in a broader sense as well.
4. Methodology

‘In Burma, even more than countries at peace, research is never “just research” — it is always a contribution to a discourse that may reify or change the situation it describes.’ (Brooten and Metro 2014, 16)

In order to explore the role of monastic schools and teachers’ agency in relation to social cohesion, this research takes an exploratory and critical ethnographic approach. In line with this approach, data was collected with qualitative data collection methods, namely non-participatory observations, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, diverse participatory activities, and informal conversations. These methods were chosen because they enable the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the local context, daily lives, and rituals of the chosen research group. Likewise, these methods proved to be effective for gathering valuable information on teachers’ perceptions of themselves, their roles, and their relations within the school and community.

This study follows certain principles of critical ethnography, which are aligned with social justice and critical lens that were explained in the theoretical chapter. Historically, critical ethnography emerged within the field of education in Britain to shed light on the role social class plays in education, however it also served as a critical push to examine the potential roles schools have in the social and cultural reproduction of gender roles, social class, racial, and ethnic prejudice (Anderson 1989). Simultaneously, critical ethnography aims to overcome structural determinism by emphasizing the importance of ‘symbolic action’ and placing human actors and their interpretive and negotiating capacities at the centre of studies (Angus 1986 in Anderson 1989). Hence, from a critical ethnographic perspective, this study takes a holistic approach to exploring how monastic schools serve as a complex environment with enabling and constraining forces within which teachers operate, while acknowledging the diversity of their experiences, positions, and capacities in negotiating these forces.

Lastly, this study deviates from a ‘conventional ethnography’ by acknowledging that research is a subjective, value driven, and a political process, especially when considering political and religious forces in Myanmar (Brooten and Metro2014). Likewise, in contrast of keeping the researcher ‘hidden’ throughout the research process, this thesis uses self-reflexivity as a tool for making the researcher visible and acknowledging their influence in each phase of the study. Principles applied throughout this study were also inspired by feminist guidelines of conducting research that highlight the importance of power relations and the quality of relationships between the researched and the researcher (Parr 2015). These guidelines denote ‘quality research relationships’ as based on mutual respect and empathy and allow the researcher to adopt greater methodological flexibility instead of following rigid conceptions of methods (ibid.).

For these reasons, this chapter provides a thick description of the methodological side of this thesis. Firstly, ethical considerations are elaborated in depth because of their prominence and impact on the entire research process. In conjunction with ethical principles and the critical ethnographic approach, the second section elaborates on issues related to the researchers’ positionality. Thirdly, the rationale for the multiple research locations is explained and followed by an overview of different phases of the research design. The next section provides an overview of the qualitative and ethnographic methods that were applied for data collection. And lastly, this chapter describes certain challenges and limitations of this study.
4.1. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles are fundamental to every research process, especially when considering Myanmar’s colonial past, military dictatorship, and ongoing ethical and religious conflict. Therefore, Brooten and Metro (2014) emphasize the importance of prioritizing ethical issues as a central rather than peripheral part of the research, as well as treating potential ethical dilemmas as an integral part of the research process. As a general guideline during the fieldwork period, I adopted what Kovats-Bernat (2002) refers to as a ‘localized ethic’ approach to research. This approach is mainly informed through advice and recommendations from the local population and foreigners with significant knowledge on the context of monastic schools (ibid). On a similar note, Brooten and Metro (2014) argue that the code of ethics should be grounded in the real instead of an ideal world while ensuring that research is conducted sensibly. Hence, during my fieldwork period, regular consultations were made with my local supervisor, foreigners who have been living within the monastic school for an extended period, and foreign teacher trainers and education experts.

This localized approach to ethics proved useful for my research process for several reasons. Firstly, because of the complex and multi-layered nature of conflict in Myanmar, I decided to draw on the knowledge of local people as a main source of information on how to navigate the environment and human interactions and used (mainly Western-based) academic literature as a supporting source of information. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, conflict in Myanmar is multi-layered, encompassing tensions related to scarcity of resources, inter-religious, and ethnic-state relations, and Islamophobia. These different layers of conflict have different levels of sensitivity, meaning that local people are more open to discuss the conflict between ethnic groups and state army, while the crisis in the Rakhine state remains a precarious topic of discussion. Lastly, depending on the topic of conversation, I remained methodologically flexible and made appropriate adjustments to the interview questions according to the informants’ background and responsiveness (see box 2 below). Generally, ethical principles were followed through a process of case-by-case negotiation while prioritizing informants’ and my personal safety before data extraction.

**Informed Consent**

Informed consent was secured before each interview and focus group, that included informing participants about the purpose of the research and future use of collected information (Bryman 2016). In addition, voluntary participation, confidentially of information, anonymity and the right to abstain from answering certain sensitive questions were emphasized before each interview. Throughout the entire data collection process, informed consent was acquired verbally. Avoiding the use of written informed consent forms was advised by my supervisors who were experienced in conducting research in Myanmar. Likewise, Kovats-Bernat (2002) find that consent forms tend to induce anxiety within settings that are historically marked by political oppression. Through an ethnographic lens, formal consent forms often come across as obtrusive and disrupt the intimate atmosphere of individual interviews.
Personal and Informants’ Safety

Ensuring safety of informants was another essential ethical principle that intertwines with participants anonymity and confidentiality of information. Pseudonyms are used when referring to informants in this thesis, however, it was challenging to ensure informants’ anonymity and privacy while collecting data. Some schools I visited counted merely six to eight teachers which made them easy to identify within the visited community. In addition, monastic schools are treated as community spaces and are often overcrowded. Interviews with teachers were mainly conducted within the school compound and common spaces such as classrooms, teacher offices, library, and lunch rooms. These spaces are used by many people and it rarely happened that the interview was conducted in a quiet and private space without the presence of other people. Likewise, because it is considered rather inappropriate for women to socialize with monks, at least one novice monk was present when conducting interviews with abbots and monk teachers. Furthermore, drawing from experiences of the first focus group (Box 2), I did not initiate discussions on highly sensitive topics, especially discussions regarding Rohingya minority.

4.2. Researcher Positionality

From a perspective of critical ethnography, the researcher plays an important part throughout the entire research process and should be made visible (Miled 2017). This study also acknowledges that research processes inevitably includes the 'human lens' of the researcher and awareness of the researchers' positionality is essential in understanding this 'lens' (Brooten and Metro 2014). Therefore, self-reflexivity played an essential part during and after the fieldwork period. Dennis (2010) argues that reflective practices are a way of thinking and dealing through ethical issues, that were particularly important during my stay at the monastic school and intensive immersion in the field as a white, foreign (Western) researcher. Hence, self-reflexivity plays an important part in this study and the fieldwork diary serves as a tool for increasing transparency and reflection on research-related and personal challenges encountered in the field.

Conducting ethnographic research and living within a monastic school had a double-sided nature with numerous advantages and disadvantages. On a general note, Westerners are quickly labelled as specialists, especially within the context of this specific monastic school that tends to assign high value to Western models of education. Having a label of a Western researcher proved beneficial in terms of gaining access to numerous organizations which enabled me to conduct interviews with people in senior positions. On the other hand, this label added pressure to some informants to present monastic schools in a positive light and express desirable answers.

Box 2 Gathering information while considering issues of safety

The main purpose of the first focus group was to explore participants perceptions and definitions of certain words and concepts, and potentially draw comparison to Western conceptualizations of certain concepts such as social cohesion, conflict, peace, religion etc. In addition, I asked participants on their views of Rohingya minority and realized that I was crossing borders of harming participants' and my own safety. The group switched to speaking Burmese and concluded that they lack information on Rohingya, because ‘it is a government secret’. Although the cleansing of Rohingya minority continues to be discussed internationally, Burmese people remain reluctant in discussing this topic in public or with foreigners. Collecting data without harming participants or my own safety was a constant balancing act during the fieldwork.

(Fieldwork notes, 12-11-2017).
On a personal note, additional attention had to be given to my positionality in terms of shifting between different roles I adopted within the school environment, namely foreign female researcher, an English teacher, facilitator of workshops for teachers, yoga instructor, and a friend of several school staff members. These roles were often blurred, and concrete separation was not always possible, therefore self-reflective practices were used to keep track of how these roles influenced the process of data collection. During my prolonged stay at one of the monastic schools, I was neither labelled as a complete outsider nor as an insider, therefore I navigated my position within an ‘insider'-outsider’ continuum (Miled 2018) depending on a given situation and context. Adopting different roles such as a teacher at the school enabled me to engage in the daily lives of other teachers as well as to build more meaningful relationships with the school staff. In most cases these positions positively influenced the data collection process, since teachers became more open to sharing their experiences in interviews. Special attention was given to my position as a facilitator of Personal and Professional Development and Critical Thinking Skills (PPD&CTS) workshops with teachers, which were also used as a tool for data collection. To avoid a paternalistic approach, these workshops were constructed through a process of co-creation together with the teachers. Likewise, to lessen the power imbalances, I emphasized the difference of being a facilitator rather than being a teacher.

Although power imbalances were to a certain degree an integral part of this research, adopting different roles positively affected the process of data collection. The importance of building trust with informants became even more apparent when conducting interviews with teachers from schools that I only visited a couple of times, in comparison to the school where I lived. As a result, interview questions were adapted according to levels of trust shared with the informant, the vulnerability of the informant and willingness to discuss sensitive topics related to religious and ethnic conflicts. Methodologically, these adaptations resulted in a rather heterogeneous data set and subsequent necessary flexibility in data analysis.

4.3. Research Design and Data Collection

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, the data collection process consisted of several research phases and locations. This process is divided and depicted as consisting of four distinct phases (Figure 3), however in reality these phases overlapped to some extent and did not follow a purely linear but rather iterative process. Because monastic schools and teachers in monastic schools acted as two main units of analysis, two rather separate sets of interviews were conducted simultaneously, including representatives of relevant organizations and teachers at monastic schools. Rather than following a systematic predetermined research protocol, this process developed rather organically, depending on access granted to certain institutions and schools, random sampling, and unexpected opportunities for data collection, such as living and volunteering at the monastic school and spending a week at the monastic teacher training centre.

Overall, fieldwork included two main research locations, namely Mandalay and Yangon (Myanmar), and a brief stay in Chiang Mai (Thailand) (Appendix 1). The fieldwork period began in September 2017 in Yangon where I conducted initial interviews at one monastic school, through which I gained access to one of the biggest monastic schools, located in Mandalay where I lived for 2.5 months and collected a large part of the data. Mandalay was chosen as a main location of the study because it is known as ‘the holy centre of the state’ with numerous monasteries and monastic schools (Britannica 2017). In addition, Mandalay has become a cultural and religious melting pot of the country, however it has been at the heart of hostile extremist anti-Muslim Buddhist movements since 2014 as well
Lastly, while extending my visa in Thailand, I also conducted an interview with a Burmese education specialist in Chiang Mai.

**Phase 1: Becoming acquainted with the field (Yangon)**

The first month upon arriving to the field was devoted to acclimatization and becoming familiar with the local context. Yangon was chosen as the first research site because it is the main location where most of the national and international organizations are based.

During the first weeks I had several meetings with my local supervisor who acted as one of the main gatekeepers and guided me in choosing relevant organizations and people within the field of education. After gaining access to several organizations, core interviews with representatives of organizations working in the field of education were conducted first. Because of the lack of published literature on the monastic education sector, I took this first phase to gain knowledge on the operation and organization of monastic schools. Although these chosen representatives were not experts on the monastic education sector, they offered valuable information for situating monastic schools within the broader national education sector, reform process, as well as shedding light on existing inequalities and power relations at play within these education structures.

Furthermore, the initial phase included several visits to the first monastic school and served as testing grounds for questions that were prepared before the fieldwork. Most importantly, attention was given to vocabulary and sensitive questions related to ethnic and religious conflicts. These initial impressions from interviews were valuable and resulted in a few adaptations of vocabulary that was used during the interviews. It became clear that the phrases such as 'social cohesion', 'peacebuilding' and 'agency' are not locally coined but rather Western concepts that were 'imported' to Myanmar by international organizations.

**Phase 2: Becoming acquainted with the field (Mandalay)**

Non-participatory observations in schools.
- Building trust.
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers.
- First focus group discussion with teachers.

**Phase 3: Core Interviews and Participatory Activities (Mandalay)**

Participatory activities.
- Building Trust.
- *Core Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers and MEDG Staff Members.*
- Second focus group discussion with teachers.

**Phase 4: Feedback sessions and Wrapping Up Fieldwork (Mandalay & Yangon)**

Presentation of preliminary findings and feedback session with teachers and school staff at the main school in Mandalay. Information checking with the local supervisor.
organizations. Therefore, in terms of posing questions on social cohesion, references were made to ‘community’, ‘living together’, ‘perceptions of diversity’ and ‘relations between different ethnic and religious groups’. Most importantly, because of the ongoing inter-religious tensions within Myanmar, most specifically in the Rakhine state, a precautious approach had to be taken when posing questions of a sensitive nature. It became evident that chosen informants were very diverse in terms of their willingness to share honest opinions with a foreign researcher on the ongoing conflict and inter-religious relations. Also, because the Buddhist religion and the Sangha hold an important and respectful position within Myanmar, only few informants were willing to directly critique the operation and position of monastic schools within the context of social cohesion.

Phase 2: Becoming acquainted with the field (Mandalay)

After paying a few visits to the first monastic school in Yangon and building closer relations with their staff members, I was advised to contact one of the largest monastic schools in Mandalay that is known to have an established practice of hosting foreign volunteer teachers. Fortunately, I received a positive response from them and was invited to live and work as a volunteer teacher within the school compound. Upon my arrival to the school and after a receiving a warm welcome, I decided to be as transparent as possible about my role as a researcher within the school. I explained the background of my study and clarified that research is my priority during my stay at the school. Although I did not consider myself a professionally trained teacher, I agreed to facilitate English conversation classes.

Non-participatory observations

During the first weeks of my stay at the school I focused mainly on non-participatory observations, that were used to gain a better understanding of the schools' culture and teaching practices. In addition, I also used observations as an entry point to meet the teachers and build trust. Initially, participant observations served as a useful tool for two purposes: myself becoming acquainted with the social and operational dynamics of the school, and vice-versa, for teachers and students to notice and become familiar with my presence within the school. At later stages of fieldwork when core interviews were conducted, these observations also served as a tool for triangulating teachers' verbal accounts with their behaviour and classroom practices.

Although non-participatory observations offered valuable information, my presence clearly disrupted the natural course of teaching sessions and the behaviour of participants. In some cases, teachers invited me to assist them with English classes, while in other cases they misunderstood my role and assumed that I was there to observe their teaching practices and gave them feedback for improvements at the end of the session. These situations were quite uncomfortable and made me realize the importance of self-reflection on my positionality in the field and ethical principles. Both are elaborated in depth in chapters 4.4. and 4.5.

First Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Group with Teachers

After the classroom observations, a few teachers agreed to have an individual interview and participate in a focus group. These initial interviews with teachers also gave me valuable insights into the Burmese culture that served as guidance in conducting interviews with locals. In most cases, the interviewees were not comfortable in sharing their views which can be related to the history of living under an oppressive military regime where the culture of silence was prevalent. Furthermore, Burmese people pay high respect to monastic schools, the head abbot, and monks that are often referred to as 'the sons of Buddha'. Taking this into account, I realized that gathering critical and open
views on monastic schools and teachers' perceptions on different social groups will be methodologically and ethically a challenging task.

Focus groups were also included as one of the methods for gathering information, but most importantly for understanding groups' perceptions and meanings they ascribe to concepts included in the study (Bloor et al 2001). Based on first impressions and the necessary levels of trust in conducting focus groups, I decreased the number of focus groups and eventually conducted two focus groups. The purpose of the first focus group was to learn more about teachers' views on their roles as teachers and to gain a local understanding of social cohesion. Likewise, I decided to test the grounds on more sensitive topics, such as views regarding Muslim people and the Rohingya minority. These rather unfruitful attempts for discussions resulted in unpleasant silence that indicated the sensitivity of these topics and the importance of securing informants' and my personal safety as well.

*Phase 3: Core Interviews and Participatory Activities*

*Building trust*

Due to the sensitive nature of this study and the embeddedness of monastic schools and teachers within the Buddhist religion, building trust and closer relationships with participants became essential. Informants had to become comfortable with the presence of a foreign (white) researcher within the school and have a sense of trustworthiness in order to share their experiences and genuine views on topics related to inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations. Reciprocally, trust building was necessary from my personal and researcher point of view as well, since I had to feel comfortable to pose questions and open discussions on sensitive topics. Alongside the necessity to build trust with informants for research purposes, I decided to immerse myself deeper into the daily school life also for the purpose of 'giving back' as well as becoming a part of the researched community.

*Image 3: Informal conversations with the Buddhist monks in Mandalay.*
Participatory activities

For a better understanding of the daily lives of teachers and trust building, I facilitated a set of workshops for monastic teachers on ‘Personal and Professional Development + Critical Thinking Skills’ (hereafter PPD&CTS). These workshops were co-created with eight monastic teachers and took place over a period of one month. Drawing from experiences with the first focus group, through these workshops I wanted to create a safe space where teachers could openly share their experiences and opinion on diverse topics. The last session of these workshops was carried out within the format of a focus group and resulted in a lively and open discussion on a few controversial topics, including diversity within Burmese society and the complexity of inter-religious relations.

Participatory activities that were not part of data collecting methods but rather served as activities for engaging and understanding the local culture included: participating in daily morning meditation rituals, facilitating English conversation classes, teaching yoga classes, having meals and spending time at the school restaurant that serves as a social gathering space for local staff (instead of having meals in canteen reserved for foreign volunteers). Although these seem as trivial practices in terms of data collection, they had a significant impact on building friendships, choosing participants and building deeper relations with informants.

Core Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers and MEDG Staff Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Method and Group of Participants</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews with Monastic Teachers</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews with MEDG Staff Members</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured Interviews with Education Specialists</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Discussion with Monastic Teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In total:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group discussions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Number of interviews, focus group discussions and participants in total.

The third phase of the fieldwork was the most intense stage of data collection which included core semi-structured interviews with monastic teachers and MEDG staff members. Semi-structured interviewing was one of the main data collection methods because it enables a natural course of the interview process with a certain degree of flexibility to vary the sequence of questions and pose additional questions when needed (Bryman 2016, 201). Although a list of questions served as a guideline for interviews, due to the diversity of informants and sensitivity of certain questions, it was challenging to include all questions in every interview. Informants’ comfort and feelings of safety to

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6 For more details on PPD&CTS workshops see Appendix 2.
7 Certain informants work as MEDG staff members and teachers as well.
share information were always considered before posing more sensitive questions. As a result, the interviews did not follow a rigid format but were more dynamic. If informants seemed reluctant to discuss certain topics, these were left out and enough space was given to them to raise topics they deemed important and comfortable to discuss.

In response to the language barrier, a few interviews were conducted with a translator. Due to limited financial resources I was not able to hire a professional translator therefore two local friends from the school acted as translators. Within this rather unprofessional setting the translator acted as a barrier between the interviewee and me, rather than a connective mediator. Therefore, a large proportion of participants had a good level of English speaking skills.

**Sampling**

The management staff was the main point for familiarizing myself with the organization of the school and teachers upon my arrival to the monastic school. Initially, teachers were chosen following a random sampling method. However, this approach was very impersonal and incongruent with the nature of the study, therefore I became more selective in choosing research participants. Hence, considering the necessity for a more personal approach, the importance of trust building, and the sensitivity of the research topic, *purposive sampling* proved as the most efficient method for selecting key informants. Based on the principles of purposive sampling, research participants were chosen based on their experience, availability, and willingness to participate, as well their ability to communicate their opinion in a clear and expressive manner (Palinkas et al 2015). As a result, two sets of criteria were formulated for two distinct groups of informants. Firstly, English language skills, experience and knowledge on the national education system, peacebuilding, and monastic schools were two main criteria when selecting informants for the macro-level analysis of this study. Secondly, for exploring teachers’ perceptions and experiences on a micro-level; significant level of trust, English language skills, as well as interest and availability to participate in research were considered. Although adherence to these criteria resulted in more personal and in-depth interviews, they certainly posed limitations to this study which are further elaborated in *chapter 4.6*.

**Phase 4: Feedback sessions and Wrapping Up Fieldwork**

During the final period of my stay at the monastic school I conducted the last interviews and presented my preliminary findings at the monthly teachers’ meeting. This presentation also served as a feedback session to include teachers’ perspectives on the research findings and ensure that the interpretation of data and observations were congruent with the local context and reality. Furthermore, after spending a decent amount of time living within the school, building friendships, and gaining rich information for my research, appropriate steps for 'leaving the field' were considered. These included announcing my departure at the teachers’ meeting, a wrap up session with the group of teachers that participated in the workshops and sharing a Christmas dinner with the schools' staff. In addition, after the fieldwork period, many relationships were maintained, and certain participants were contacted for 'member checking' to provide feedback and clarification of the research findings.

**4.4. Data Analysis**

Collected data was divided in two sets that were coded separately, both in the Atlas.ti software programme. The first set comprised of interviews conducted in Yangon with representatives or staff members of relevant education organizations, and interviews conducted with staff members of the Monastic Education Development Group (MEDG) in Mandalay. This set of interviews was coded
through the lens of the 4Rs framework, with the four dimensions presenting main themes and most prominent aspects of each dimension generating sub-themes. While coding, memos were also taken, especially to note codes or aspects that were not initially expected, or in some way 'deviated' from the 4Rs framework.

The second set of data comprised of interviews with 21 monastic teachers. I used open coding to identify the most prominent themes. The next step included scoping the interviews with teachers and already existing codes in comparison to the ecological approach to teacher agency and possible connections. Therefore, the second set of data was analysed from a rather inductive approach and the themes that emerged are more ‘data driven’ than in comparison to the first part with the 4Rs analysis of monastic schools.

4.5. Limitations of this Study

The main limitation of this study is related to the rather limited timeframe. The fieldwork period lasted four months, which was in practical terms interrupted by two ‘visa trips’ to Thailand. Likewise, although I devoted a significant amount of time and effort to building closer relations, I remained labelled as a foreign researcher. While I managed to build closer relations with some informants and they felt comfortable and willing to share their experiences and opinions openly, others remained reserved, shy, or nervous during interviews.

In the same way, the language barrier posed another limitation to data collection and representativeness of the sample. To explore teachers’ perceptions of themselves, personal views, and experiences related to social cohesion, teachers had to have a reasonably high level of English speaking skills. Although I conducted a few interviews with a translator, most of the participants were comfortable and able to express themselves in English language. However, these teachers are not necessarily representative examples of monastic teachers. Participants also differed in their abilities to express themselves in English which resulted in the rather varied quality and depth of interviews.

Transferability and Representativeness

The aim of this study is not to generate generalizable findings but to offer an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and views of social dynamics within the conflict affected context of Myanmar. Therefore, an auditing approach, thick descriptions of the research context and the application of different research tools are provided for readers to assess the degree to which the findings of this study can be applied to other social settings. Likewise, this research process was a rather personal and unique process that took place within a certain space and period of time, meaning that it is possible that other researchers could reach different, but equally valid conclusions.

Although four monastic schools were visited in total, the greater part of interviews were conducted at the main monastic school in Mandalay where I was staying for two and a half months. The decision to conduct the large part of core interviews in this school links back to the language limitations and importance of building trust. Although I have payed several visits to other monastic schools, it was difficult to establish close relationships with teachers and to find teachers with a good level of English speaking skills. This poses a limitation to the representativeness of this study because by some standards the main monastic school in Mandalay would not be categorized as a 'mainstream' monastic school.

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9 These two data sets overlap to some extend as three participants worked as staff members of MEDG and part-time teachers as well.
school. The operation of this school is funded in large by local well-wishers and foreign organizations, which differs it from monastic schools that remain under resourced. Because of these investments, activities of foreign organizations and regular contact with foreigners, teachers at this monastic schools have a decent level of English speaking skills and were more comfortable in being interviewed by a foreign researcher. Other monastic schools do not enjoy this type of privileged position and external exposure; hence their teachers could have expressed different views and verbal accounts than the group of informants that were selected for this study.

5. Layout of Empirical Chapters
Subsequent three chapters shares insights into perceptions and experiences of research participants and provide answers to research questions. Chapter 6 focuses on the notion of teachers’ agency for social cohesion and multifaceted roles monastic teachers adopt within the context of Buddhist monastic schools. Next, chapter 7 takes a birds-eye view of the monastic education sector to understand its place within the broader field of education and social cohesion in Myanmar. The role the role of monastic schools as actors for social cohesion is analysed and depicted through the lens of 4Rs framework. Lastly, chapter 8 draws findings from these two chapters together and illustrates how agency of monastic teachers relates to processes of social cohesion. Likewise, in this chapter I reflect on linkages between different theoretical concepts and certain limitations to applying ‘Western-based’ concepts in this study. Lastly, chapter 9 offers recommendations for further research.

This chapter introduces teachers included in this study and aims to answer the first sub-questions: *What roles do monastic teachers adopt to exercise their agency for community-based social cohesion?* (SQ1) and *What are monastic teachers’ motivations for their work?* (SQ2)

Before delving into these questions, the first chapter describes the sample of teachers who participated in this study. The following subchapter describes different ways teachers exercise their agency and frames these within different categories (roles) teachers adopt in the context of Buddhist monastic schools. The next subchapter focuses in on teachers’ motivations for their work as one of the aspects of agency and examines how these motivations relate to social cohesion.

6.1. Introducing Monastic Teachers (the Sample)
As depicted in *Table 2* (below), the sample of monastic teachers who participated in this study is quite diverse. Firstly, it is important to know that teachers’ profession, in Myanmar, as in many other countries, remains highly feminized. Burmese men are culturally perceived as the main breadwinners of the family, and the teaching profession does not provide them enough income to fulfil this role. However, monastic schools are known to be more male dominated because monks tend to pick up the teaching profession within their monasteries (Higgins et al 2016). Also, Buddhist monks are not expected to engage in tasks related to the everyday life, including working and handling financial matters, but it is considered acceptable if they assist with teaching and other chores in their monasteries. Other male teachers from this study are young teachers who engage in teaching for various reasons (further elaborated in chapter 6.3. on teachers’ motivations) or senior teachers who had multiple positions within (e.g. working at MEDG/teacher trainers) or outside of schools.
The sample was also diverse in terms of the ethnic background of teachers. This is mainly related to the fact that monastic schools are welcoming towards disadvantaged children from different areas of the country that are affected by conflict or natural disasters. However, teachers did not differ in their religious beliefs, as they all defined themselves as Buddhists. In terms of different age groups, it was challenging to find senior monastic teachers, because of the high turnover of staff, again relating to low salaries. However, I managed to interview a few senior teachers who have chosen to work at monastic schools, mostly for personal reasons (also further elaborated in subchapter 6.3.).

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>&gt;10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buddhist Monk</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2 Characteristics of monastic teachers.*

6.2. Teachers’ Roles for Social Cohesion

Combining the work of Horner et al (2015) and Higgins et al (2016), together with the data collected, I determined the following roles teachers adopt in relation to social cohesion: 1) technocrats; 2) teachers as multitaskers; 3) direct and indirect agents of social cohesion; and lastly 4) teachers as perpetrators and recipients of violence. On a similar note to the ecological approach to teacher agency (Biesta et al 2015), Horner et al (2015) emphasize that these roles are more indicative than discreet, illustrating that ways in which teachers exercise their agency depends to a great extent on social structures and the context at a given moment (Horner et al 2015). In practical terms, this means that teachers adopt different roles, depending on existing structures, the given situation, and available resources. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the multifaceted nature of these roles and the duality of teacher agency in contributing to social cohesion in positive as well as negative terms.
Teachers as Technocrats

‘While in rhetoric they [teachers] are often idealistically portrayed as bringers of enlightenment to the poor, in reality, the combination of Northern-Inspired education models and neo-liberal economics has reduced them to little more than factors of production.’

(VSO 2002, 17)

Framing teachers as technocrats focuses on the performative side of their profession, hence, limiting their obligations to tasks of transmitting certain sets of skills, such as reading, writing, mathematics and so forth (Loped Cardozo 2011). The quote above summarizes the idea that a neo-liberal, human capital framing of the teaching profession, pushes teachers to teach in an instrumental way with the main aim of ‘creating’ productive citizens (ibid). These narrow framing demands that teachers merely adopt standardized formats of teaching and focus on students’ performance by following the outlined curriculum. The national education system therefore remains exam-oriented and main objectives are ‘to get through the curriculum and for the children to pass the exams’ (Higgins et al 2016, 93). Lopes Cardozo (2011) claims these neo-liberal views of the teaching profession downplays teachers’ to taking up the merely pedagogical role of ‘delivering’ well-performing pupils, leaving aside the societal roles they could potentially play.

On a similar note, monastic teachers often shared that they feel pressured to cover all the contents of the curriculum, hence left with little time to use additional materials or extracurricular activities to integrate the ideas of social cohesion into their teaching. For example, Daw Lyin Oo (senior teacher) shared that she is not able to apply the RWCT methods to the teaching:

‘Not always possible because I teach in 9 and 10 grade, because of two things. One is – many students, two is – I link to the government test. [The principal] said all teachers, our teachers use RWCT, he wants to use RWCT method from kindergarten to standard 8. Standard 9 and standard 10, not possible and a little difficult. Because their content is, look... [showing the textbook]. Chapter 1 and 2 needs to be finished by June, then is 3,4,5 is July. Teachers run through teaching and run through to explain. And the rest is in January. At that time, some teachers are not detailed in the lesson.’

According to the Burmese education system, in grades 9 and 10, the students prepare for the matriculation exam, that is formed by the Ministry of Education. Therefore, teachers mainly use rote-learning methodologies, focus on repetition and memorization to prepare the students for the government matriculation exam. All these elements limit teachers’ time, as well as their motivation and energy to adopt other roles that could cultivate social cohesion. Horner et al (2015) also claim that teachers’ technocratic role not only contributes little to peacebuilding and social cohesion but in fact erodes the notions of social justice and democracy.

Teachers as Multitaskers (and Overworked)

Teaching is not a static profession and teachers often take on multiple tasks and roles (Higgins et al 2016). This is especially evident within monastic schools, where it is common for teachers to assist in fundraising activities, vaccinations of students, local and even national elections. In words of one of the senior female teachers ‘Yes, in our country election days, teachers work together. And then health, medical prevention, at that time, our teachers volunteer to help nurses and doctors and the community.’

Furthermore, because of poor salaries, teachers often take up additional jobs to make ends meet. In combination with an exam-oriented education system, teachers often mentioned the practice of tuition and its’ impacts on their teaching. One of the male teachers, Thein Theth, shared his experience of offering tuition classes after regular teaching hours:
‘This year I teach Myanmar subject and next year I also teach Myanmar subject, so I can learn it by heart. Sometimes we cannot, we don’t need to prepare. We don’t have time to prepare. Because of the salary. If we have enough salary, between 8 and 16.00, in this school time, if we make enough money, we don’t need other work.’

Teachers reported as being overworked with additional tasks and extra teaching hours they take up alongside their regular teaching time. Consequently, they fall short in preparing for their sessions that not only lowers the quality of their teaching, but leaves them limited time and energy, to adopt additional societal roles that would be expected of them.

**Teachers as Direct and Indirect Agents of Social Cohesion**

Framing teachers as direct agents of social cohesion includes their belief and perception of themselves as capable of bringing about a change within the classroom (school), wider community, and society (Bourn 2015). Interviews with monastic teachers revealed only a handful who explicitly stated their aspiration and perception of themselves as meaningful contributors to processes of social cohesion.

For example, Aung Mote, young teacher and a monk, expressed his views of teachers’ role of acting as moral agents:

‘Yeah, I have three reasons. One reason: teacher not need to discriminate students – blind, disabled, non-religious, no discrimination. Because teacher, we believe in our country that ‘the chalk in the hand of the teacher can change the world’, do you understand? Teacher can change the country, can change the world. That is why the teacher plays an important role for the school and for the community. That is why the teacher cannot do discrimination. I think that reason is important for the teachers. Because in Myanmar in the government schools, even though they are teachers, they do discrimination, that is not good. We need to change this, like revolution.

The second is, teachers need to be more active. Because if the teacher can be active, the students can be active. And the students can do together, study together equally and they can do whatever they want. You know some teacher, even if they teach in class, they teach in a formal way, they never create their own ideas – what students need, what students want, what students want to learn and do more? That is why I mean that the teacher should be active in the class. The teacher can change their demonstration, according to the location and according to the classroom, they can do by themselves. Because we are the leaders of the students. Because the students make a copy of our behaviour. That is why teacher should be honest and teacher should be active.’

This excerpt illustrates an example of a teacher who stands firmly in his belief of being capable of bringing about social change through his teaching profession. He also emphasizes the teachers’ role in changing discriminatory practices that apparently still exist in government schools and some monastic schools, as revealed by another teacher. Furthermore, he expresses a high level of agency, by stating that teachers should ‘create their own ideas’ and adapt their teaching accordingly to a given ‘location and classroom’.

On a similar note, Thantar Lwin expressed his ambition to address the issue of discrimination within schools and changing the curriculum:

‘Yeah, right now my passion is much more. I am not only passionate about teaching, but my interest is also to bring peace content into education. When I was young, I am Buddhist, but the thing is that we always argue, for Jesus, or Buddha, or Islamic lord is more powerful. We don’t, even in our school, we don’t really have a very strict religious discrimination, but to some extent we still tease each other based on our identity, based on how we believe, or based on the colour of our skin.’
In addition to having these ambitions of changing the school system, one teacher also exercises her agency for social cohesion beyond the school walls, by opening a library within her own home where she welcomes children and adults from the community and carries out story-telling sessions and other activities. Thandar Win, who works at MEDG and part-time teacher, explains her background story that led to opening the library:

“So, when I finished my studies [in New Zealand], I came back and used all my saving I built a library in my house. So, I teach in my library and I also do some storytelling and performances for other kids. I am also very much interested in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, so I do teach the children about that.

My usually approach is not to put the children into the library and asked them to sit and read. My approach is to take them around and explore the environment related to what they have read and then start like that. And I also take them to different religions institutions, we went to a mosque and a church in September. And before we go I would ask them ‘What do you think about Muslims?’ and they say, ‘Oh Muslims are these people with a beard, darker skin and they wear these white clothes.’ And I took them to Chinese Mosque where people are very different from their imagination [laugh]. (MEDG Staff Member 1)

Image 4: Story telling at the ‘Open Library’ in Mandalay. Courtesy of the library.

Thandar Win exemplifies a (direct) agent of social cohesion who expresses a high level of agency in her community. However, these activities are mainly carried out outside the walls of monastic schools, namely in her home environment. To a certain extent this relates to contested concerns which were raised around carrying out activities with a ‘peacebuilding’ connotation within monastic schools, which are not always positively accepted by the Buddhist community. One of these examples is project ‘Diverance’ (see box 4).

Box 3 Environment and Circumstances affect Teacher Agency

Within the group of participants in this study, these few teachers that act as direct agents for social cohesion are exceptional rather than representative cases of teachers in monastic schools. Although they work within the same environment with other teachers, some of them are in favourable positions with more financial and knowledge resources. For example, Thandar Win, who works at MEDG as well as a part-time teacher had the opportunity to finish a master’s degree in Australia. She was awarded with a scholarship and decided to save up her money and invest it in building a library within her home. Likewise, Aung Mote is primarily a monk and lives within the school compound, where he receives financial and other sources of support from the local community and the Sangha. Although these individuals express a high level of agency, their circumstances work favourably for them to be able to engage as agents for social cohesion.
In addition to acting as ‘direct’ agents, most of the teachers act as ‘indirect agents’ by engaging in social cohesion in more subtle ways with an emphasis on interpersonal aspects of social cohesion. Teacher’s role as indirect agent is valued through acting as a role model for students. In the words of Pyoe Aung, young male teacher:

‘Here in Burma, we very respect our teacher. So, the role of the teachers is not only to teach the children, but to guide them. For example, the way I live, the way I eat, the way I go, the way I do my work. So, the children are always looking at me, they care me, how can I say. They respect me, and they learn from me, how to live their life. So outside, if they see me drinking beer, so in the classroom they will not respect me. Or, they will drink like me. And here in Burma we have, how to say, five components of the teacher. First one – we have to teach the children, we have to give the knowledge and listen to them, we have to guide them. The second component is that you have to correct your students, for example if your student steals or smokes, you have to tell them not to smoke. You correct their character, you make their character soft, or make them speak in the correct way. And then, if something happens to your children, you have to protect them. The rule of the teacher is also to protect your kids. You have to guide, for example what the child should do. If he or she is interested in being a doctor, they want to be a doctor, you need to guide him how to be a doctor. You have to give him a good suggestions or advice. This is what a teacher has to do.’

Likewise, Pyoe Aung is one of the participants that articulated an awareness of the multiple roles teachers have within classrooms and beyond. Particularly within the context of monastic school, they often take up the role of second caregivers of children living within the schools, who are orphaned or live away from their families. In this excerpt, the teacher also emphasized the importance of promoting values of good behaviour for children, especially by setting a good example.

Furthermore, more closely linked to social cohesion, Myat Soe, senior female teacher, shares that: ‘Sometimes other ethnic groups, Burmese, they fight. And that time I try to solve this problem, and I told them not to fight and to understand each other, I try to explain to be peaceful.’ The way teachers manage the classroom environment and model peaceful resolution of conflicts, sends a strong message to students and as a result they learn how to peacefully manage conflicts around them ‘at interpersonal, classroom, and community levels’ (IRC 2006, 6). These teachers exemplify ways how constructive conflict resolution in classrooms can instil positive values to their students, that are transmitted to wider society as well.

Teachers as Negative Agents of Social Cohesion (Perpetrators of Violence)

Teachers are not always perceived positively, nor do they take actions to positively influence the process of social cohesion, in fact they often (non-)intentionally contribute to the exacerbation of social tensions. Considering Bush and Saltarelli’s (2000) distinction between two faces of education, this section unpacks several ways monastic teachers contribute to the negative, destructive face of education in conflict affected areas. A few teachers that participated in this study shared their negative beliefs and views of people from minority religious groups, namely Muslim and Christian. By sharing these discriminatory and hostile beliefs, teachers directly or indirectly contribute to the exacerbation of tensions between different religious groups within monastic schools and wider society as well.

Thantar Lwin, young male teacher, shared a few ways how teachers engage in acts of discrimination and ‘micro aggressions’ within the classrooms, based on students’ skin colour:
‘Until today, because teachers are used to use the words like, I’m not sure if you are familiar with the word ‘khala’\textsuperscript{10}. ‘Khala’, for example, if you are a girl and you are black, the teacher can say ‘Hey Khala ma!’, so it means like mocking his or her skin. Okay, your skin is so dark, you are so dark. Most of the children, they don’t want their skin to be black and they feel very shy if they are called like that. Or teachers say to boys ‘Hey, Khala li!’ Some teachers still use these kinds of words. So, my belief is, as a teacher, most children they spend most of their time at the school, so I think it is very important as a teacher to understand diversity.’

In addition, he shared phrases that are culturally, widely accepted and used to refer to Muslims in a degrading manner:

‘Another thing in our society is that for example when a child is crying, we just say ‘Stop crying or a Muslim guy will come and grab you.’ And the child will stop crying, even though he doesn’t know if a Muslim is good or bad. But starting from that, from our inner mind – we are afraid to be different.’

Both quotes depict attitudes towards people with darker skin and Muslim minority within the country, that are instilled in students from an early age onwards. Besides their caretakers, teachers represent crucial figures in fostering or transforming these beliefs. These examples unfortunately show that (monastic) teachers still use degrading phrases in classrooms, re-confirm existing prejudice and indirectly erode social cohesion.

Furthermore, Lay Hnin, young female teacher articulated her personal, discriminatory views of Muslim people:

‘In my village they hate Muslim people, and I also hate Muslim people…. Because they have black skin and they are killing the cows. They kill cows, I don’t like\textsuperscript{11}. …Because, in my opinion, Buddhist and Muslim are not the same. Not the same culture and not the same religion.

...Muslim people bring many women. They have many wives. For example, I am a Muslim, but you are Bamar, you are a girl, I am a boy. I marry you, and then I also marry another. They marry Myanmar people\textsuperscript{12}…. I am Muslim, but you are Buddhist. And when we are married, you need to change your religion. More and more Myanmar people are getting changed into Muslim religion. Myanmar people don’t want to change to Muslim. For example, I am Muslim, and you married me, you need to change to my religion, to my culture. If you don’t change to Muslim religion, they will kill you.’

In this excerpt, Lay Hnin expressed her views on Muslim minority that are closely aligned with the anti-Muslim narratives that have been spreading in Burmese society in the past years. These prejudices towards religious minorities can be consciously or unconsciously brought to schools by teachers and not only erode the process of social cohesion, but even exacerbates existing tensions. Through the lens of the 4Rs framework, with these beliefs, teachers reject the recognition of minority groups on an equal basis as the majority Buddhist Bamar group, hence leaving no space for the process of reconciliation.

\textsuperscript{10} ‘Khala’ is a Burmese term used to derogatively refer to people of darker skin, mainly Muslim and Hindu.

\textsuperscript{11} Buddhist people are predominantly vegetarian and consider cows as holy creatures.

\textsuperscript{12} This teacher is referring to rumours that have been spreading across Myanmar about Muslim men marrying Buddhist women and forcing them to convert to Islam. These rumours have been used to fuel anti-Muslim sentiments and further reconfirmed with Parliament’s approval of Interreligious Marriage Law. This law imposes restrictions to interreligious marriages and aims to ‘protect’ Buddhist women from forced marriages with men from other religious groups (Zaw 2015).
As outlined in the theoretical framework, community-based social cohesion emphasizes the importance of social relations, including the importance of trust and tolerance between different social groups. Although these statements are not representative of views of all monastic teachers, they do illustrate the broad range of beliefs teachers hold towards minority groups. Low levels of trust between different religious groups were mentioned in many informal conversations with locals, and indirectly expressed by Phaung Lyin, young male teacher, as well:

‘Differences between Buddhist and Muslim? Most of the Muslim people are not kind, they are very bad men. Muslim are not the same with me. I hear that most of the Muslim people don’t eat pork, they don’t trust. They don’t drink from the cup that other people drink\textsuperscript{13}, they only drink from this cup. Most of the people eat pork, but Muslim people don’t eat pork. I had one Muslim classmate. And I asked him – why you don’t drink the water after I have drank from this cup?’

Taking the example of drinking from a cup as a small social bonding habit among Burmese people, the teacher emphasizes differences between these Buddhists and Muslims and indicate mistrust and intolerance between these groups. Drinking from a single cup exemplifies only one of the habits practiced among Buddhist Bamar that contribute to the ‘bonding aspect’ or intra-group belonging but shows lack of inter-group or ‘bringing aspect’ of social cohesion (Cheong et al 2007), that would support the process of reconciliation.

Similar views were expressed among participants of the second focus group:

Su Lay (female teacher): ‘We don’t give permission to come to our township, like really refuse those [Muslim and Hindu] people. If there are like Muslim people, and they build monasteries in my town, my people, many people who live in my town, they destroy those buildings. That is why when I came in here [monastic school], I hate Muslim people when I see them. So, I don’t know their mind, there will be differences, even like, there will not be the same mind or manner, but when we, when I, see those people, I hate. But I don’t know why, I have no reason. No one knows if Muslim people will attack me, I don’t know, but I hate. That is why we need to learn more about them, Muslim, and Hindu, for example. Also, we need to know about other ethnicities. We will know better their diversity, their mindset or their manner, or behaviour.’

Win May (female teacher): ‘I also hate Christian but why I hate Christian people, I don’t know… [mumble].’

These two teachers shared commonly held views on Muslim and Christian minorities within their home environment and through discussions reflected on these prejudices but failed to completely rationalize them. However, without reflecting and resolving these discriminatory views, teachers (un)intentionally or (un)consciously continue transmitting these hostile beliefs within and beyond their classrooms and fuel tensions between different social groups.

\textsuperscript{13} It is common to find water pitchers with one cup in public places across Myanmar, which are used by many people. In this excerpt informant refers to the fact that Muslim people usually refuse to drink from these public cups and indicates low levels of trust between them and Buddhists.
Teachers as Victims of Violence

On the other side, in conflict-affected environments, teachers can also be victims of violence. The areas I visited in Myanmar did not report cases of active and direct violence in the past years, hence teachers did not mention any cases of direct violence or feelings of threat. However, Thantar Lwin, young male teacher, did report experiencing threats in relation to launching a peacebuilding project ‘Diverance’ (Box 4) within monastic schools:

‘On Facebook they [certain Buddhist monks] attack us ‘Okay, if you don’t stop...’, and that was only the first part, like a pilot phase, because our goal is to bring peace education into monastic schools. Okay, our pilot project was successful, now we will go to our real project... And then we decided to invite monastic school principals, who are Buddhist monks, and other religious leaders just found out and started to attack us. And they spread the message ‘If you don’t stop the project, they told the abbot, you are crossing a personal danger. So, we received that kind of threatening messages over Facebook.’

The project ‘Diverance’ and teachers’ accounts exemplify political and religious sensitivities of active engagement of monastic schools and teachers in peacebuilding activities. Thantar Lwin also reported experiences of feeling unsafe while carrying out this project and eventually disengaged with it completely. The case of ‘Diverance’ reveals existing power relations and inter-religious tensions within Burmese social structures that permeate the educational system as well. Moreover, this is an example how these existing structures, and more specifically monastic order, poses limitations and in some cases endangers teachers’ direct engagement in process of social cohesion.

6.3. Teachers’ Motivation for their Work

In this thesis, I often refer to teachers collectively, however, one of the most important findings was that they are a highly heterogeneous group with unique personal backgrounds and experiences that strongly influence their professional roles as well. While previous chapter elaborated on diverse roles teachers adopt as ways of exercising their agency for social cohesion, this chapter delves into more personal aspects of teachers’ professional lives (micro level of teacher agency) and focuses on their motivations for choosing the teaching profession.

The ecological view of teacher agency also emphasizes that ‘agency doesn’t come from nowhere’, but it builds on past understandings, achievements, patterns of action and is ‘motivated’ in different ways (Priestly et al 2013, 4). This relates to the *iterational* dimension of teacher agency, which considers teachers’ professional and personal backgrounds as core elements that shape ways of achieving agency. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, this chapter primarily focuses on teachers’ professional
and personal backgrounds in relation to their teaching vocation and ways of exercising agency for social cohesion.

Monastic teachers, as a group of unique individuals, shared a broad range of reasons for engaging in teaching. However, for analytical purposes, I group these motivational factors into six categories. This categorization builds on Woods’ (1981, adapted by Welmond (2002)) classification of teacher motivation and contextualizes it to the Burmese context by adding religious aspects of motivation. Woods describes three categories of teachers’ motivation. Firstly, teachers have a (1) vocational commitment to teaching by caring for their pupils and encouraging growth and learning. Secondly, teachers can have a (2) professional commitment as subject specialists, aiming to charter a career within schools or the education system. Thirdly, teachers also choose teaching because of (3) absence of viable alternatives (career continuance) (Woods in Welmond 2002, 44).

Based on the local context, religious environment of monastic schools and motivational drivers expressed by teachers in this study, I add three dimensions: (4) career and learning opportunities, (5) religion, and (6) social (transformative). Opportunities as motivational drivers appeared as prominent in one of the monastic schools that is well funded and connected with foreign investors and organizations, hence offering myriad options for students and teachers for their professional and personal development. However, these opportunities cannot be generalized to other monastic schools, that remain underfunded and rarely manage to establish a network with foreign organizations. Religion was another motivational driver that appeared prominent among monastic teachers, that expressed their devotion and loyalty to their monastic schools or the abbot. Lastly, social or transformative motivation (inspired by Lopez Cardozo 2008) was added for a few examples of teachers who expressed their motivation as being driven by their ‘broader’ ambition of changing social or educational structures. Lastly, it is crucial to keep in mind that teachers as dynamic actors reason their actions as driven by several motivational factors, and in some cases, these change along their career path. Figure 4 illustrates this dynamic nature of agency and potential overlaps of teachers’ motivations.

Figure 4 Motivation as a dynamic element of teachers’ agency.
Teachers’ Motivation – Vocational Commitment

Monastic schools are known to cater to the poorest children, hence, many teachers expressed their motivation to be driven by their aspiration to help children in need. Monastic schools are often not able to provide ‘decent salaries’ to teachers, therefore their motivation often lies in the desire to serve for a good purpose and help their students and communities. In conversation with one of the abbots about motivations of monastic teachers (box 5), he confirmed that they are often eager to serve and work for the ‘common good’. Also, the abbot made a direct connection between the teachers’ altruistic motivation and peacebuilding. He claims, that specifically ‘their good mindset’ and philanthropical drive behind their work, despite the economic hardship and often unfavourable conditions, makes them able to positively contribute to social cohesion.

Furthermore, because of low salaries and convenience, monastic teachers often reside in the school compound, eventually becoming more connected to the school community and in some cases even more motivated to continue teaching. Nhaung Thun, shares his experience in becoming motivated in teaching throughout his work:

‘At that time, before, I was not interested in teaching children, and then I sleep here together with children, I eat with them, I play, and I changed my mind. Because they really need my help, for language, and especially this school really needs some more teachers and staff for the students. Because children come from different areas, and they need more care.’

Nhaung Thun is an example of a teacher with ‘multiple’ motivational drivers for becoming a teacher. Initially, he expressed an interest in working in a different field, however his desire to teach was sparked once he became more involved with children and teaching itself. This example illustrates the fluidity of teachers’ identity and agency, as well as the influence of the environment on teachers’ agency (Priestley et al 2015).

Teachers at monastic schools often expressed their care for children and how their work expands beyond the schools’ walls. This ‘special care’ and strong personal motivation to help children in need was expressed by Daw Su, senior female teacher: ‘...and sometimes I also offered counselling to them, how is their life, I ask them, and I listened them. I told them that spending time on the street is not good, sniffing glue is not good, also not for their education. I also explain good things to them. Most of the children they spend their time on the street and they don’t study or work, and they also ask money from the foreigners. Sometimes they came to the school regularly, but sometimes they disappear. When they disappear, I look for them, near, stations, Bogyoke market.’

This teacher exemplifies the strong sense of belonging to the community and acceptance in monastic schools that was often mentioned by other teachers as well. For example, another teacher stated that ‘...it is different between monastic and the government school. In monastic school, they can live like a family with students, and in the government school they cannot live like a family. And if they do some mistake, it is not good. In monastic school, sometimes they make a mistake and it is not a problem. In government school, it is a problem.’ (Myat Soe, senior female teacher)

Box 5 Abbots’ Views of Monastic Teachers:
‘Yes, I believe teachers can contribute to peace because their hobbies and their interests are based on education and kindness to help other people. They don’t care about the money. They care about how to help people. What energy they have? They have energy to share with other people. Their mindset and their attitude are like that. Almost 100 percent of monastic school teachers think like that. If they cared about money, they would change to big companies because the monastic schools can give them just bit money. Therefore, I think they can contribute to peace effectively based on their good mindset. They, themselves are happy staying in monastic schools even though they face some difficulties. Most people do not think like that. They just think how to get more money and get good jobs. I think they come here and teach because of their kindness and benevolence.’
Berger-Schmit states that specifically these micro relations and connections between societal units, either individuals, groups, or associations, act like ‘glue’ that bind communities together (2002). Furthermore, Botterman et al confirm that social cohesion refers to the presence of structural, as well as attitudinal mechanisms of solidarity, cooperation, and exchange between citizens in a society (2012, 186). These networks can be based on material, as well as immaterial exchange – i.e. informal relations and shared identities (ibid.). Teachers that I interviewed, often expressed their work within the frame of ‘belonging’ to the school’s community, rather than treating their work as strictly bound to their professional obligations. This aspect of ‘belonging’ proved as prominent but subtle topic in interviews and I explain it further in the subsection on ‘Teachers’ Motivation – Religion’.

Teachers’ Motivation – Professional Commitment

Certain teachers described their motivation for teaching as a clear professional desire and framed themselves as subject specialists, aiming to charter a career within schools or the education system (Welmond 2002, 44).

Pyoe Aung, male teacher, is an example of a teacher that is driven by an interest in the teaching profession that he discovered at a later stage of his career path:

‘So, before that, I did not decide it. I think myself, when I am teaching others, my lower feelings...how can I say, when I am feeling low or depressed, or something happened to me. So, when I’m teaching to kids or adult, I forget all of that, I only emphasize on teaching and I am happy. That is why I continue working as a teacher, that feeling is very good. I am very passionate for teaching or talking to others.’

As mentioned earlier, due to low salaries, teacher turnover is high in monastic schools, therefore it is difficult to find senior teachers that have been teaching at a monastic school for a longer period. Myat Soe, is one of the informants that has been teaching at the same school for her entire career, hence I was interested in her personal and professional reasons for teaching at one school:

Translator: ‘So, it is different between monastic and the government school. In monastic school, they can live like a family with students, and in the government school they cannot live like a family. And if they do some mistake, it is not good. In monastic school, sometimes they make a mistake and it is not a problem. In government school, it is a problem.’

On a similar note as explained earlier, the teacher expressed a sense of belonging to the monastic school. Although she is driven by a professional interest in teaching, she is not eager to transfer to a private or a government school because ‘they cannot live like a family’. Although I did not pay a visit to a government school during my fieldwork, which would enable me to have a better understanding of experiences of state school teachers, based on informants in this study, most of them preferred to work at a monastic school because of their personal affection to the monastic school community.

Teachers Motivation – Absence of Viable Alternatives (Career Continuance)

Despite the passion most of the teachers expressed for their teaching, some teachers were not driven by strategic or (direct) intentional motives in deciding on a career in teaching. Quite often teachers expressed their choice as an alternative option to different ‘dreams’ they held personally.

For example, Phaung Lyin, shared that he ‘wanted to be engineer. That is not real [laugh]. I can be engineer, if I finish grade 10 with good marks. In my country if you want to be an engineer, you should have high marks.’
On a similar note, Soe Thu, senior male teacher, shared his path into teaching:

‘ST: I had two dreams, to become a football player and to become a teacher.

M: And how come you decided to become a teacher in a monastic school?

ST: I was dreaming about attending government teacher’s university. To become government official teacher, but in Myanmar education system it depends on your high school score quality, so if it is not high quality, you cannot join university. So, I did not reach government teacher university. And at that time, luckily, the monk from my village was going to open a monastic school. And I said, I want to be a teacher and I want to teach, so I will be a teacher in your monastic school.’

These two teachers are among many who shared that becoming a teacher at a monastic school was an alternative option to their first career choices, exemplifying the reality of multiple motivational factors behind teachers’ professional choices. Often, they referred to the marking system existing in Myanmar schools with a sense of frustration. They felt limited or to some extent at the mercy of the competitive education system and followed the teaching path as ‘the second-best option’.

On a similar note, in an interview with a translator, Khin Aung, shared that becoming a teacher was her ‘second dream’:

‘When she finished the high school, she wanted to be a nurse who takes care for soldiers. But if she wants to be nurse, she needs high marks, but she did not have high marks in high school. That is why she cannot do this. So, the first one is she wanted to be like that and it is broken, the second one, she wanted to be a teacher.’

‘And other motivation is, her house is near to this school, to the monastery. That is why she decided to work in here and then later she loved it here. And now she is older, and her house is near to this monastery and it is okay for here, she decided to work in here. That is her motivation.’

In addition to having her first dreams ‘broken’, the second quote exemplifies the convenience of choosing to teach at a community monastic school. This example illustrates the heterogeneity of the constitution of teachers, and the fact that not all teachers aspire, or have sufficient resources - either material, health, or energy - to take upon additional social roles or engage in processes of social cohesion.

Lastly, Khaing Kyaw, male teacher and teacher trainer, shared his view and problems related to choosing the teaching profession out of a lack of alternative options:

‘The ladies, if they don’t have jobs, they became teachers. For Myanmar, if you a teacher, most of the people respect you. So, in their community, they have respect from everybody. But, you didn’t want to be a teacher. So, they don’t have their work for the students. Some time, they just phone and they just talk. They don’t make any teaching aid. They don’t create good environment for the students. They don’t have any interest in teaching.’

Khaing Kyaw pointed out a few problems that arise in the work of teachers when they are not genuinely motivated by the profession. Firstly, becoming a teacher as ‘the best second’ option or based on its ‘respected’ position within society creates unmotivated teachers that are prone to adopt a rather technocratic teaching role. Secondly, becoming a teacher out of convenience, leads to the devaluation and the ‘de-professionalization’ of the teaching vocation (Giroux 2003). As a result, teachers who choose teaching as an alternative option to their primary aspirations rarely decide to intentionally engage in processes of social cohesion.
Teachers’ Motivation – Career and Learning Opportunities

The fourth category of motivations was created additionally to Wood’s (1981) definition of motivational drivers for teachers’ work, based on informants’ accounts and observations made at schools. Due to high teacher turnover and poor working and wage conditions, monastic schools often fall short in teacher numbers. Hence, they are open to accept the young and untrained, or teachers in training, offering them a rather easy entry point into the teaching profession.

Lay Nhin, shared her motivation for teaching at a monastic school, closely linked to her future aspiration to work as a government teacher:

‘I want to be a good teacher! That is my, the most interesting goal. But my really aim is – I want to be a good teacher at the government school. I don’t want to stay at the monastic school, I want to work at the government school. It is good for my future. Now I am teaching and getting knowledge, when I get enough knowledge I can go to a different school and get another job, to be a good teacher.’

Furthermore, teachers often expressed their interest in learning and seeking opportunities for professional or personal development. Although these learning opportunities cannot be generalized to other monastic schools, they are available at one monastic school that is well-funded and known to cooperate with foreign governmental and non-governmental organization. These include teacher trainings, language courses, and various workshops. Based on observations, teachers and students at this school are eager to take advantage of these opportunities.

Thein Theth, male teacher shared his experiences in partaking in various trainings and workshops:

‘When I became a teacher, I worked in the office, near [the abbot]. And then I attended the training, CCT and after that I started teaching. If we work at the office, we can attend other trainings. If we want, we can attend, whatever training we want – English, computer, or teaching methodology, we have right to attend. [The abbot] allowed us to attend.’

Students and teachers at monastic schools usually come from a poor background and taking advantage of these cost-free courses offers them an opportunity for further development, which they could not usually access. Often, as a result of these opportunities they are keen on living and working (also as teachers) at their school after their graduation.

Furthermore, in relation to social cohesion, working closely with certain national and international NGOs, monastic teachers are given opportunities to attend teacher trainings on ‘peace’ related topics as well. Having this flexibility of dual governance by the MoE and Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture, monastic schools have a certain degree of freedom and space of manoeuvre to introduce trainings and workshops that would not be welcomed or considered too sensitive in state-led schools. Some teachers shared their positive experiences in participating in trainings, that are linked to social cohesion:

‘Okay, I attended one training, that is interreligious training. We studied over six months, we studied at the Bridging programme. We studied Buddhism, also Islam, Christian and Hindu. Every religion has their own goal, but I believe that this goal is the same. I believe Buddha, they indicate to Buddhism as a good thing in our life, how to live, how to treat others. Another God says like that. That is why I believe that the goal is the same.’ (Aye Aung, female teacher).
On a similar note, Thantar Lwin, one of the leaders of the project ‘Diverance’ (see Box 4) explained that his interest in peacebuilding ‘might be because of the Pre-college programme, where I joined a conflict resolution and peacebuilding courses’. However, due to the lack of standardized or clear professional development path for teachers in monastic schools, only a few teachers have the opportunity or aspiration to attend this type of trainings. Professional and personal development of monastic teachers therefore remains highly individualized; hence their diverse backgrounds, education, and resources manifests in a broad range of ways of exercising agency.

**Teachers’ Motivation – Religion**

Teachers in monastic schools live and work within a predominantly Buddhist (Bamar) environment, therefore, religion plays an integral part in their professional and private lives as well. Participants I interviewed often expressed their motivation for teaching as closely related to either Buddhist principal of ‘merit making’ and/or their aspiration to ‘give back’ to their school that provided them education. Furthermore, in this chapter, I elaborate on teachers’ motivation in relation to appreciation and loyalty towards head abbots in monastic schools, as well as hierarchical dynamics of these relationships.

The eminent Burmese saying, ‘to be Burmese is to be Buddhist’ (Schober 2017, 1), confirms both the historical and contemporary role of Buddhism as one of the fundamental blocks of national identity. Generating merit is one of the essential Buddhist principles that is practiced on a daily basis among Burmese people. On a similar note, teachers expressed their service of teaching as closely related to the idea of ‘giving’ and ‘doing good’:

‘When I was younger I admire their teaching and I also wanted to become a teacher myself. I also want to give as much as I can, to teach other people. Our Myanmar culture, we give good things and we get good things.’…. I arrived here in 2009, before 2009, one of my teachers he asked me if I would like to teach at a monastic school as a teacher. First, I rejected his offer. But then he told me, now I am getting old, and you need to do good things for your future. You don’t need many, you only give sincerity and empathy to the children.’ (Daw Su, senior female teacher)

Besides being motivated to generate merit through teaching, teachers also shared their appreciation for their monastic schools and their aspiration to serve the community that has given them educational opportunities and support:

‘So, for me, I wanted to work for this community, because this school is so beneficial for me. Before I come here, I don’t know anything. Here I learned English, I finished my school, then I attended university. Everything is free, they give us everything for free, so I feel I should give something back to this school. That is why I am working here.’ (Pyoe Aung, male teacher)

In addition to serving their school out of appreciation for the community’s support, teachers also referred to giving back to their head monk out of appreciation for his support. This again, links to the highly respected position of Buddhist monks in Myanmar. In addition to sharing their sense of belonging to their community, sense of loyalty was often specifically linked to the abbot:

‘I attended this school since 1999 and I was very happy to live here. When I finished grade 11, I did not know what I will do. And then [head abbot], he is one of the people I admire, and I will try to provide to him. How can I say. They made me to be educated, so I will try to help, I will try to help [head abbot], so I will be a teacher.’ (Thein Theth, male teacher)
Another senior teacher, Daw Lyin, shared her motivation and admiration of the abbot:

‘Not money. I respect our principal and according to Myanmar tradition my family respects our principal and always donate for something. And my family always believed. And now our principal is a hero for me. His work is very useful for my, our people. Yes, not money, later I am very interested in our school. I am interested in teaching.’

Daw Lyin is one of the few senior teachers who participated in this research. After sharing her motivation for teaching as related to merit-making and respect for the abbot, I was also curious to know more about her motivation to continue teaching at the exact same monastic school for over twenty years:

‘DL: Why I love the school... I love my husband [laugh]. Yeah, really, there is a reason. My husband and me were not agreed by my parents. Our principal agreed my husband. This is not a joke! [laugh] At that time it is not agreed, but our principal said: ‘You are Buddhist, and my husband is Buddhist’. [the abbot] agreed. My mother is not agreed.

M: Why not?

DL: I am educated person, I have a degree, and my husband does not have a degree. At that time, my principal, he said ‘okay’. Your selection is very important.’.

Sharing this personal and unique experience, again illustrates the dynamic nature of teachers’ identity and motivational forces, that might not directly relate to the teaching profession, neither to the aspect of social cohesion. Furthermore, this excerpt brings to attention the significant role abbots play within their communities and teachers’ lives, and as a meaningful factor that influences teachers’ agency as well.

Teachers’ Motivation – Social Justice (Transformative)

This category of teachers’ motivations emerged from collected data and was inspired by a few individual teachers that explicitly shared their passion to contribute to a ‘greater’ change, either in broader society or directly within the national education system.

For example, Thantar Lwin, male teacher, stated:

‘But as I mentioned before, I found my hidden passion, which is working in the field of education. I am not sure why, but I think day by day I discovered, okay that is the field I am passionate about. Like one of the reasons is not having equal opportunities in [Monastic School] and meeting different children. Like, when I was young, I was diagnosed as a student with dyslexia and then my teachers suggested to my mom to send me to vocation school rather than academic school. My mom, she doesn’t know about anything, but she tried really hard to give me money to support my education. And in the beginning, I felt really, really guilty. But later, when I was 17 or 18, I don’t know if I am too proud of myself, but I really believe that I am not a student with any difficulties, but the school system made it difficult for me to learn. So, if I become a teacher, I will use different methods. Back then I did not know different methods or what are the benefits of child-centred approach, what are ethics of a teacher, or what are child’s rights. But from my inner mind, I expected to do different from what I was taught. And later, around 18, I attended a teacher training for child-centred approach and training for critical thinking. And I was very interested.’
In this passage, Thantar Lwin brought to attention existing inequalities with the monastic education sector and individual monastic schools as well (further elaborated in chapter 7.2. Redistribution). He also expressed high level of agency and motivation to use the teaching profession as a channel for addressing issues of inequality and changing teaching methods within the schooling system.

On a different note, Aye Aung, young female teacher, shared her views of teachers as actors within the school system with limited agency and authority to bring meaningful changes:

M: ‘Can a teacher change the education system?’

AA: No. Because in our school, in our country, the Ministry of Education controls the whole country. But especially monastic schools can be changed, but the government schools cannot change, because the government controls them. That is why, if I have the authority, I can change.

M: If you have authority, if you work where? What is your dream for the future?

AA: To become an education minister, ministry official. If I have the authority, I can change. I can persuade the chief of the government, I can discuss, I can persuade to allow on my way. But as a teacher, I cannot. Because I am a teacher now, but I can change only my classroom. But we can’t change the whole school. I can only change my classroom, I can teach my students the better way. But at the academic level when they change to a different school, it will be destroyed.’

In this excerpt, the teacher explains her aspiration to change the education system while sharing the underlying belief that teachers themselves are not able to meaningfully change the education system. Indicating low levels of agency of an individual teacher, she shared her aspiration of becoming an education minister as one of the means for gaining ‘more authority’. The also teacher points out to the fact that teachers operate within existing educational structures, that are elaborated in the subsequent chapter 7 on the role of monastic schools in the national education system and social cohesion.

6.4. Concluding chapter 6: Monastic Teachers’ Multifaceted Roles for Social Cohesion

This chapter examines the micro level of teacher agency by elaborating different motivation factors behind teachers’ work and various roles they adopt when exercising their agency for social cohesion.

To begin with, one of the objectives this study aims to achieve is to move beyond an over-deterministic application of existing theoretical notions of agency and social cohesion and offer more space for local empirical insights. Likewise, in line with the post-structuralist foundations of this research, the aim was not to reach continuity or regularity, but to acknowledge fragmentation, potential contradictions, and discontinuity in finding meaning (Davies 1991). In this sense, both, motivational drivers for teachers’ work and roles for social cohesion revealed the dynamic nature of teacher agency, especially within the context of Myanmar and Buddhist monastic schools.

Applying a post-structuralist lens to this research also allowed for critical scrutiny of the dominant individualistic (Western) view of human agency, that remains framed within elitist and masculine understandings of agency as a feature of selected few (Davies 1991). In response to discourses of agency as an over-individualistic attribute of merely few individuals, the ecological approach frames it as something people do and exercise, instead of possessing (Priestley et al 2013). In this sense, agency ‘denotes the ‘quality’ of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves’ (Priestley et al 2013, 3). This perspective on agency allowed for acknowledgment of different ways monastic teachers exercise their agency, especially within Myanmar, a country with decades long history of political and social repression that linger in
contemporary time as well. In this sense, every teacher is recognized as an agentic actor, capable of contributing in some way or another to processes of social cohesion – including inconspicuous and anomalous ways that are often labelled as ‘inactive’ or ‘less agentic’ within Western framings of agency. Even more, considering ongoing conflicts, tensions, and religious structures of Buddhist monastic schools (further elaborated in chapter 7), it would be quite unrealistic and even hazardous for teachers to act as agents for social cohesion in individualistic, ‘active’ and direct ways, as learned from the example of project ‘Diverance’ (box 4).

Keeping this view of agency in mind, monastic teachers proved to exercise their agency for community-level social cohesion through adopting different roles, namely the role of technocratic teachers, multitaskers (or overworked), direct and indirect agents of social cohesion, and perpetrators of violence. From a broader perspective, these roles are influenced by an international neo-liberal framing of the teaching profession that focuses on the performative side of education and forces teachers to teach in an instrumental way with the main aim of ‘creating’ productive citizens (Lopes Cardozo 2011). Hence, exam-oriented education system at a national level, voluntarily or involuntarily, pushes monastic teachers to fall into the group of technocrats. This narrow, instrumental framing of teachers leaves teachers with limited (or no) space to positively contribute to social cohesion. On the contrary, through the lens of social cohesion, by adopting a technocratic role within the national education system, teachers in fact indirectly contribute to existing inequalities (further elaborated in chapter 7).

On a similar note, a great number of monastic teachers can be labelled as ‘multitaskers’ for several reasons. Firstly, due to poor working conditions and low salaries, teachers often pick up additional jobs after their teaching hours or offer tuition hours to make ends meet. This directly, erodes the quality of their teaching, as well as the societal value of the profession. Often, teachers expressed their concerns with the practice of tuition, that remains unaffordable to most of the students, which in response reinforces existing inequalities and exacerbates societal tensions in the long-run. Nevertheless, Novelli and Sayed (2016) question how much more we can expect teachers to do, particularly in challenging and risky environments such as Myanmar. However, these are also environments where teachers as peacebuilders are most needed.

Next, monastic teachers exercise their agency as direct and indirect agents of social cohesion. These two framings emerged from the data, as most monastic teachers remain unaware of their potential, or do not necessarily perceive themselves as being able to meaningfully contribute to social cohesion. In this sense, the ecological view of teacher agency also emphasizes the importance of the relational component of agency which intertwines with interpersonal aspects of social cohesion. Horner et al (2015) also claims that teachers can transmit positive moral values to their students with ways of managing their classrooms and modelling peaceful resolutions of conflicts. Not limited to the walls of classrooms, teachers, especially in Myanmar, are held as ‘second’ caretakers of children and act as their role models. As stated by Pyoe Aung, male teacher: ‘So, the children are always looking at me, they care me, how can I say. They respect me, and they learn from me, how to live their life.’. In essence, most monastic teachers influence processes of social cohesion in indirect and subtle ways.

Only a few teachers included in this study perceive themselves or reported to directly engage in processes of social cohesion. Through the interviews, these teachers demonstrated knowledge and awareness of the poor state of the national education system and felt compelled to contribute to
improvements as well as strengthening the role of education in peacebuilding. For example, Thantar Lwin, one of the leaders of the project ‘Divergence’, aspires to directly incorporate peace education into monastic schools. However, these types of activities that directly address issues related to conflicts in Myanmar are usually ‘nipped in the bud’, often from the Sangha itself. Having that in mind, some teachers choose different channels to exercise their agency for social cohesion. For example, Thandar Win, MEDG staff member and a teacher, built a library at her home where she teaches values of peacebuilding and conflict resolution through story-telling and diverse methods of experiential learning. Although this study included a small number of teachers, one can claim that these examples of teachers who exercise their agency as direct actors for social cohesion are rather exceptional than representative. As elaborated in Box 3 (‘Environment and circumstances affect teacher agency’) and in line with the ecological approach, these teachers can exercise a higher level of agency due to their personal aspirations to contribute to societal changes, but also due to favourable circumstances that granted them the necessary knowledge and financial resources to do so. Nevertheless, Priestly et al (2013), emphasize that teachers not only work in their environment, but by means of their environment, hence, acknowledging how teachers are enabled as well as constrained by their social and material environments.

Furthermore, teachers should not be overly romanticized, especially in conflict-affected contexts, where they (non-)intentionally engender conflict and violence. A few participants in this study exemplify how teachers act as perpetrators of violence, physical and symbolic as well. Although seemingly decreasing, corporal punishment remains a culturally acceptable practice in Myanmar which creates a sense of normalization around using violence as means of conflict resolution (Higgins et al 2016). Furthermore, a few monastic teachers expressed hostile and discriminatory views towards Muslim and Christian minorities. These are again, examples of subtle ways how teachers erode social cohesion and fuel existing hatred and tensions between different social groups. Discriminatory personal beliefs teachers bring to classrooms and vocabulary (such as ‘Khala’) through which they express hatred towards religious and ethnic minorities are distressing examples of how teachers act as negative agents of social cohesion and hamper processes of potential reconciliation.

Moreover, this chapter examined motivational drivers behind teachers’ decisions to begin teaching at monastic schools and how these relate to social cohesion. Teachers accounts show that monastic teachers’ engagement in teaching remains motivated by their vocational and professional commitment, absence of viable options, opportunities for personal and professional development, and their aspiration to contribute to social justice/societal transformation (Figure 4). It is important to emphasize that teachers often expressed multiple reasons for teaching that often changed throughout their career path. Data also illustrates that teachers included in this study expressed their motivations as driven mainly by their vocational commitment (care for their students) and religious factors. These two motivations are very specific to the Burmese context of monastic schools that follow the principles of Buddhist religion, including its main principles of ‘merit making’, i.e. ‘doing good’ as an investment for future reincarnations. Besides that, several teachers voiced their reasons for teaching at monastic schools in relation to their appreciation and loyalty to head abbots. Mainly coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, they valued opportunities and support they received from head monks for their academic and professional development. However, examples of admiration often illustrated hierarchical relations within monastic schools with the head abbots supporting, but in most cases limiting teachers’ agency.
Most importantly, linking teachers’ motivations and agency for social cohesion disclosed that monastic teachers often choose their profession for reasons that indirectly relate to their roles as agents for social cohesion. Only a few teachers (3) expressed their motivation for teaching as a channel for bringing change to the education system or transmitting peacebuilding values to younger generations. Other teachers choose teaching for other reasons that lead them into adopting other roles for social cohesion, most commonly technocratic, or the role of multitaskers, hence limiting their awareness and ability to exercise their agency for social cohesion. Lastly, not all teachers have sufficient material or physical (health and energy) resources, nor do they aspire to take upon additional roles for social cohesion besides their daily responsibilities.

Lastly, although this thesis aims to deviate from discourses on structure-agency within social science, it is crucial to acknowledge that teachers do not operate in a vacuum and remain highly influenced by existing structures. Therefore, in line with the ecological approach, the following chapter zooms out from the personal (micro) level of teachers experiences and contextualizes these within the environment of monastic schools.
7. The Role of Monastic Schools in the field of Education and Social Cohesion

This chapter takes a bird’s-eye view of the monastic education sector to understand its place within the broader field of education and social cohesion in Myanmar. In other words, this chapter aims to answer the second sub-question: What role do monastic schools play in Myanmar’s national process of social cohesion?

Also, from an ecological perspective of teacher agency, understanding teachers’ experiences, ways, and quality of exercising their agency can only be fully understood when contextualized within a certain environment. For this reason, I apply the 4Rs framework (Figure 5) as an analytical tool for unpacking and better understanding the enabling and limiting forces of monastic schools and how these relate to social cohesion.

![Figure 5 The 4Rs theoretical framework (Novelli et al 2015).](image)

This framework was initially used as a guiding tool for structuring the interviews and this thesis, however, I refrained from applying it too deterministically in the process of data collection and analysis. Hence, while using this framework as a guiding tool, I gave space to informants’ accounts, local factors (such as power dynamics related to religion), and other unexpected aspects to emerge. As a result, certain dimensions appeared to play a more important role, while others (e.g. reconciliation) proved to be too sensitive and hence only briefly discussed by informants and even in some cases completely excluded from interviews. Although this partially resulted in a lack of empirical data for certain parts of the chapter, it also revealed the point at which Burmese society finds itself on the path to building a socially cohesive society.
For more clarity, this chapter remains structured around the four dimensions of the 4Rs framework, namely recognition, redistribution, representation, and reconciliation. However, in practice these dimensions remain interconnected, overlapping, and at certain points contradictory. In response, the last subsection of this chapter elaborates on these complex interrelations between the different dimensions of the 4R framework and their impact on social cohesion. As a general guideline, this analysis does not aim to generalize the role of monastic schools for social cohesion, but rather aims to depict the complexity of ‘positive and negative faces’ of monastic education in Myanmar.

Also, it is important to emphasize that this analysis does not elaborate on every point depicted in Figure 5. Instead, this chapter focuses on a few issues that appeared prominent in interviews with informants and observed at the schools. These main points and findings are summarized in Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4 R Dimension</th>
<th>‘Indicators’</th>
<th>Findings for Monastic Schools</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Status equality:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Recognition of monastic schools as an official education provider</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Monastic schools play a significant role in filling the gap in state’s education system in terms of access to schooling in rural and conflict-affected areas</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Exclusive recognition of monastic schools alongside other faith-based schools is detrimental to social cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Acknowledging Monastic Schools as Relevant Actors for Social Cohesion</strong></td>
<td>• There is a general lack of awareness and acknowledgment that education institutions, including monastic schools, play an important role for social cohesion</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• The potential of monastic schools to exercise their role in social cohesion is limited by powerful religious structures (the Sangha)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space for cultural, ethnic and religious diversity:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Monastic schools are open and accessible for children from different ethnic and religious groups, however they fail to integrate this diversity in their school environment, rituals, and learning materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Recognition and Affirmation of Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Monastic Schools</strong></td>
<td>• The policies and practices in relation to the language of instruction remain discriminatory towards ethnic minorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Language of instruction</strong></td>
<td></td>
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### Table 3: The 4Rs Analysis of Monastic Schools for Social Cohesion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Redistribution</th>
<th>Equitable redistribution of resources: Distribution of material resources and opportunities within:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the broader education system</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• the monastic education sector</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• National education sector and consequently monastic schools remain underfunded</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• In comparison to teachers at state-run schools, monastic teachers do not receive equal payment or equal opportunities for their professional development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Monastic schools do not have equal access to material and human resources, and opportunities for students’ and teachers’ personal and professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School based management and decision making (distribution of power)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School-based management remains centralized with the head abbot playing the leading role within the monastic school and community. Power is unequally distributed within the schools and head abbots play a significant role in enhancing or limiting monastic schools’ and teachers’ potential to foster social cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation</td>
<td>• Participation in national education policy and reform processes (national level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Although positive steps have been taken by the government towards making education reform process more inclusive, monastic schools remain relatively excluded from consultation meetings and the creation of policy outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
<td>• Vertical levels of trust (trust in schools and the education system)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Monastic schools are perceived as community centres for Buddhist Bamar group, however other social groups do not necessarily share similar views</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The competing nature of the national education system implicitly hampers the process of reconciliation</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 3: The 4Rs analysis of monastic schools for social cohesion.

The following subchapters offer more detailed elaboration of informants’ accounts in relation to each of the 4R dimensions and main findings for monastic schools.

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14 The 4Rs analysis of monastic schools for social cohesion also resulted in a poster (see Appendix 5) that was distributed to the members of Peace Education Working Group (PEWG), a network of local and international organizations that promote education for peace and peaceful classrooms in Myanmar.
7.1. Recognition

The dimension of recognition is elaborated first, because it plays an important role in Burmese society which notes a long history of conflict that is mainly driven by inequalities related to ethnic origins and religious beliefs. As depicted in Figure 5, the dimension of recognition considers the status of equality, respect, and affirmation of diversity in education structures and processes in terms of gender, language, religion, ethnicity, culture, and ability (Novelli et al. 2015). Due to the limited scope of this study, this analysis remains focused on the following topics: recognition of monastic schools as an official education provider by the government and acknowledgment of its role in social cohesion within the field of education and peacebuilding/social cohesion. In addition, this analysis explores micro dynamics of recognition, i.e. the role of Buddhism in relation to social cohesion, recognition and affirmation of ethnic and religious diversity in monastic schools, and the language of instruction.

Recognition of Monastic Education Sector as a Formal Education Provider

Although monastic schools have been providing education to a significant number of children since the 13th century, officially they have been labelled as one of non-formal or ‘alternative education’ providers. However, in the past years, their ‘status’ within the field of education has been changing mainly due to the poor state of the government’s education system and inability of the state to offer schooling in every part of the country. In addition to filling the gap in the national education system, the monastic education sector continues to develop and receive more support from the government due to the influence of foreign investments, global education policies, and increasing political engagement of MEDG. Lastly, according to the opinion of one of the informants, Buddhist monastic schools have been receiving more support from the government also because of the close connection between national identity and the Buddhist religion.

Foreign influence on national (education) policy-making process

In 2012 the Ministry of Education launched a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) to identify the strengths and challenges of Myanmar’s education system, crucial areas of reform, eventually producing the National Education Sector Plan (NESP) (UNICEF 2012). CESR confirmed that national education remains in a poor state, by stating that ‘resources remain constrained at all levels and public expenditure on education remains low by international standards’ and ‘there is wide disparity in access to, and duration of, quality education opportunities for different children and population groups (UNICEF 2012, 1). In response, current NESP 2016-2021 commits to increasing national financing for the education sector as well as providing access to basic primary education (MoE 2016). As recognized by few informants, this national impetus to invest and push forward improvements in the education sector, are largely influenced by global education policies:

‘Because the government, the Ministry of Education (MoE), they already apply for GPE funding [Global Partnership for Education]. So, the GPE requirements are that this project is not only managed by MoE. GPE requirement is that MoE must work together CSOs. So, government now invite CSO and NGOs. This is external influence for the government.’ (Zin Maung, MEDG staff member)

Despite the governments’ commitment to Education for All (EFA) goals and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in its national education policies (MoE 2015), in practice it still fails to provide access to primary education to all children. Many informants highlighted practical limitations that keep children out of school and the role monastic schools play in addressing some of these issues, such as:
1) hidden costs of education:

'Some parents let their children go to school, but they cannot afford it. Government schools have often high fees, they need school uniforms, and also there are transportation costs. In monastic schools, they don’t need to pay any charges, stationeries are free of charges and we provide school uniforms.' (Daw Su, senior teacher)

2) administrative limitations in accessing government schools:

'Before the challenges are different, for example, to attend primary school some requirements for example they need to show their birth certificate or similar documents, they need to prove. If they can’t, they have no chance to attend the school. But in monastic schools, there is no such requirement. Our first priority is the children who by their age, they need to be in school. So that is the easy way to attend the school. This is one of the differences between the government and monastic schools. We are very accessible. The parents just send children to the school, the rest is provided by monastic schools – slippers, uniforms, and requirements.' (Zin Maung, MEDG Staff Member)

3) lack of education infrastructure in conflict-affected areas:

'They [children] have so many reasons, because they are away from their home and they have different backgrounds, mostly they are from Shan state, some are from the border area with China, in some regions there are no schools. There are Burmese and ethnic armies fighting, so they are moving from their village. Another reason is that ethnic armies collect children as soldiers. So, their families send their children from these areas to monastic schools.' (Zin Maung)

When asked about the role monastic schools play in Myanmar, informants spoke positively about the contribution of monastic schools in providing education for underprivileged children, children with physical and learning disabilities, and children living in remote and conflict-affected areas.

In addition, even informants that spoke critically about the monastic education sector in relation to social cohesion, still confirmed that monastic schools play a positive role in securing access to basic education:

'And say it is a bit complicated, but I personally support monastic education in this situation, in education situation in Myanmar. Because the schools are not enough for everybody, most schools are in big cities, and in remote areas there aren’t enough schools. Even in the big cities, and children from poor background cannot join government schools, because the government schools are free of charge, but in practical, parents need to pay for the school building, donations, or something like that. But monastic schools, there are mostly children from poor family background, so monastic schools provide education for marginalized children. In that way I support monastic schools, so children can get education.' (Kaung Kyaw, local education specialist)

Despite the positive contribution of monastic schools in filling in the gap in the national education system, access to education itself is simply not enough for building a socially cohesive society. The following subchapter elaborates on contested issues related to securing access to education, while keeping the principles of sustainable peacebuilding of 4Rs in mind.

Adverse effects of exclusive recognition of monastic schools on social cohesion

Because of the highly respected position of Buddhist monks in Burmese society, informants rarely dared to criticise the work of head monks or monastic schools openly and directly. However, a few raised some points of contention regarding the increasing support and recognition of monastic schools by the government. Kyaw Kaung, local education specialist, shared his views on the privileged position of monastic schools:
‘Burma is not only Buddhism, not only for Buddhists, but we have many other religions – Christian, Hindu, and Muslim, and no religion, or spirit worship. So many different kinds of religious groups. But the Government Education law only allows the Buddhist monasteries to open schools. The Burmese Government Education Law does not allow Christian religion and other religions to open schools, it is not fair, it is not fair for other religions. So, this is thinking with other religions and Buddhist religion.’

‘KK: And if the government allows one religion to open schools, other religions should have equal right to open schools.
M: Do you see this happening in Myanmar?
KK: Yes, Christians they are not allowed to open schools, officially. But some Christian groups they open, without official recognition...this is how social cohesion can be destroyed.
M: Do you see this changing in the future, that other religions would be able to open to open schools and be recognized by the government?
KK: Now we [his NGO] are advocating at the government. Now at this moment no, there is no law. This is also difficult for the government, even the Buddhist monks do not want to allow other religions to open schools. Not all, but some. For example, MaBaTha15. They are very extreme. Because of the political interests of the government, they don’t want to make problems with Buddhist monks, in calculation, so the law will not be fair.’

Another informant expressed a similar view by stating that:

‘With other faith-based school... I know one school in [XX] area, a Church-based school, and as I know, they do not have support from the Myanmar government. They get the support from their headquarters based in the US. But they follow the school, government curriculum. And I don’t know much about them. I think they do the same exams as the students from other schools too. That is why, as I said, at the policy level, if they can recognize the diversity, recognizing different faiths, because we are doing the same thing, educating people. So, understanding people and accepting people, then we can move more towards peace. (Lay Su, female local education specialist)

Both informants emphasized the danger of exacerbation of tensions between different social groups by exclusively providing support to monastic schools while denying equal status, rights, and financial support to other religious-based schools. Although representatives of MEDG emphasized that monastic schools officially remain administered by the Ministry of Religious and Cultural Affairs, MoE does provide financial support to salaries of monastic teachers, while neglecting other religious-based schools. In addition, both explain that these inequalities result from an interplay of inequalities in education policies and power relations that permeate the Burmese political sphere and society. While interviewing these experts, a sense of frustration and inspiration to make changes could be noticed, and hopelessness as well in terms of firmly established power structures within the country.

Acknowledging Monastic Schools as Relevant Actors for Social Cohesion

As outlined in the introduction chapters, one of the main issues that this research explores is the linkage or disconnection between the fields of education (monastic schools) and social cohesion in Myanmar. To begin with, most of the interviews I conducted were accompanied by a sense of

15 MaBaTha is an ultra-nationalist Buddhist group or in other words (self-proclaimed) Committee for Protection of Nationality and Religion that has become known for fuelling anti-Muslim sentiments across Myanmar, especially since 2014 (McPherson 2017).
sensitivity when opening the topic of social cohesion and peacebuilding within monastic schools. However, I assume that these interviews as well as informal conversations merely mirror the existing reluctance and underlying fear present in Burmese society to openly discuss topics related to past and ongoing conflicts and even less the role of the monastic order in ongoing conflicts.

'And one thing that they [education policy makers] mentioned is, not exactly peacebuilding, they mentioned inclusion. Inclusion is one thing we need to consider, inclusion and diversity. So, there are the things that were mentioned when we are trying to implement the SDGs. So, in a way, people are, indirectly aware of the need of peacebuilding in this country. Although they don’t explicitly say ‘We need peacebuilding in our course building, we need to have a module as a subject, but people don’t do that. What they say is related to things like citizenship skills, civics and morality, because these are the principal things to understand other people. To have respect for others, to have respect for diversity. So, people talk a lot about this. So, yes, I think that the teacher education and the teacher trainers are aware of the need for peacebuilding. But they didn’t go to this extent to talk about what we should do, what we should teach in this module. They know that people should be respecting other, different things and different ideologies.' (Lay Su, local education specialist)

This quote clearly depicts the sensitivity surrounding the language of social cohesion and peacebuilding and a general lack of political will on a national level to apply the ‘language of peacebuilding’ in education policies. The informant also confirms that although awareness of the need for peacebuilding is present within the country, there is also a lack of concrete action to directly incorporate these teachings into the school curriculum and teacher trainings. Partially resulting from this general lack of connection between education and peacebuilding sectors on a national level, this linkage was also reported as largely missing in the monastic education sector as well:

'I think for the monastic schools, especially for social cohesion and peacebuilding...I think right now they are not doing that much, but I think they really have potential to do that. But first, they also need to see the value, the importance of this, social cohesion, peacebuilding. And I think they must be champions among the monastic education sector – to take this further. Otherwise, they would just focus on this - just improving the quality and education achievement of the students, and recognition of their teachers. They have right now other priority issues, like registration, especially because a lot of monastic schools they teach upper secondary classes, but the government doesn’t really support their registration. So, they have these issues...' (Myint Nann, female working for local NGO)

In this quote the informant mentions a few important issues that were raised during most of the interviews in relation to the role of monastic schools in social cohesion. Most of the informants confirmed that monastic schools remain preoccupied with other issues that seem more prominent at the moment, such as securing enough financial means for their operation, the academic performance of their students, teacher retention, etc. Thus, these challenges are among the priorities of monastic schools, leaving them with scarce resources or will to actively engage in processes of social cohesion.

Thandar Win, one of the MEDG staff members, confirmed that monastic schools remain quite inactive in the field of social cohesion also because of the lack of knowledge and expertise to tackle these issues:

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16 Often during interviewing the respondents did not fully understand the term social cohesion, which is a Western based expression that does not easily translate to Burmese language. Therefore, in questions related to social cohesion, I used different terms – peacebuilding, community, living together, peace, and referred to social cohesion as exploration of relationships between different ethnic and religious groups.
‘I think it is very rare to see, I think because people are not aware of that. One of the reasons is that monks themselves are not familiar with the thinking that Buddhism has to be connected to those specific contexts. They think like monks or teachers or normal lay people who believe in Buddhism. Usually they like to pray, donate, and like to do very basic things. It is because they don’t really have this higher order thinking and they also do not have enough education that they can relate things to other contexts and some of them are quite sensitive to relate to different fields as well. What I have realized so far is that it is not that they do not want to do this kind of education, but that they are not aware that they have to do it. And even if they are aware, they don’t know how to do it. And when they know how to do it, then there has not been experts or other people to monitor their development or other things. I have not seen that much teaching about peacebuilding in monastic schools.’

Thandar Win explains that monastic schools do not actively engage in social cohesion because of a general lack of awareness among abbots, knowledge and means of bringing teachings of social cohesion into monastic schools. Although this could be held true for most of the monastic abbots and schools, in the field I encountered more progressive minded abbots and monastic teachers as well. Nevertheless, according to their experiences, bringing projects related to peace into monastic schools was often met with resistance from the Sangha. The quote below links back to the project ‘Diverance’ (box 4) and clearly depicts the power relations within the Buddhist monastic order that constrain monastic schools from realizing their potential for social cohesion:

‘On Facebook they [certain Buddhist monks] attack us ‘Okay, if you don’t stop…’, and that was only the first part, like a pilot phase, because our goal is to bring peace education into monastic schools. Okay, our pilot project was successful, now we will go to our real project. Our real project is to organize a peacebuilding training for monastic school leaders, to get a sense of how peace education is important in the school. After that, we are trying to put peace education as a part of the content, as a part of the curriculum in the school. And then we decided to invite monastic school principals, who are Buddhist monks. And other religious leaders just found out and started to attack us. And they spread the message ‘If you don’t stop the project…’, they told to [XX abbot], ‘you are crossing a personal danger’. So, we received that kind of threatening messages over Facebook. But [XX abbot] would like to continue the project and find an alternative way with another name but the same mission.

‘Okay, to answer your question, for right now I am not sure what is the reaction of the extreme Buddhists, but the thing is that our school is also working at a low profile in terms of working for the peace working group, to put it as a part of the curriculum.’(Thantar Lwin, male teacher)

This excepts illustrates that in the eyes of these Buddhist monks, monastic schools are not perceived as a place to teach peace and should be kept separated. Although this teacher emphasized the aspiration of the head monk (abbot) to continue running this project, the limiting structures within the Sangha seem to prevail from monastic schools from directly engaging in projects related to peacebuilding.

Recognition and Affirmation of Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Monastic Schools

The dimension of recognition also demands acknowledgement of a diversity of identities and groups of students of different ethnic and religious backgrounds in education structures, environment, and teaching materials. Because of the accessibility and ‘open door policy’ of monastic schools, they have been recognized as schools that are able to provide open and affordable schooling for disadvantaged children regardless of their race, ethnicity, or religion (Higgins et al 2016). Although the diversity of
student constitutions\textsuperscript{17} depends on the geographical position and demographical composition of inhabitants in a certain area, most of the informants claim that monastic schools are accessible and inclusive to children from different backgrounds:

‘Yes, in our schools they have Islamic, Christian, some of the people are like, they don’t have a God...Monastic schools they have no discrimination in religions, they have no discrimination in gender, they have no discrimination in poor or rich. Yes, especially in the Fast Track you will see, the children play together, argue together, even though they argue, they never compare, they are not concerned by religions, black and white, poor and rich.’ (Aung Mai, MEDG staff member)

While monastic schools continue to be praised for their accessibility and diverse student composition, they fail to acknowledge and integrate diverse identities into their structures, including the teaching material. Firstly, challenges related to the language barrier were brought up by informants when discussing diversity within the schools:

‘They face a difficulty and that is a language barrier. Some of the students can’t say Myanmar language and then the teacher changes the teaching activities. Because she cannot directly instruct to the student. So, she chooses one of the older students from the same religion and if one student is Shan, she chooses another student who is Shan. Through peer learning, like that. She explains through pair work. One student Shan and the other student is Shan, but it takes more time to get learning open and what she wants to get from the students. Because some of the students do not understand the language and at that time, peer learning is okay [laugh]. (Khin Naing, senior female MEDG staff member)

This quote depicts the challenge of teaching children that come from different ethnic groups and are not (yet) fluent in the Burmese language. Although monastic schools accept children from different backgrounds, they do not have formal structures in place that would help them integrate into the predominantly Buddhist Bamar environment, nor do they acknowledge their differing identity, culture, and language. Based on experiences shared from the teachers, ethnic children are expected to ‘catch up’ with learning Burmese, mainly through informal peer support and their daily interactions. Consequently, these children are in a disadvantaged position that inhibits their learning potential and academic achievement.

One informant clearly acknowledged that monastic schools do not have any formal structures in place that would integrate the diversity awareness into the schools’ ‘DNA’ and confirmed that they largely remain a mono-cultural (Bamar) environment:

‘But I have to say, even what [XX monastic school] is doing, it is not enough yet. Of course, this is a monastic school, so we have to pray to Buddha as a ritual activity, but what about for the Muslim students, what about for the Christian students? Maybe for the most diverse, like, if we want to celebrate, we might want to have a place for them to pray and have their activities. But this would be an ideal situation in the future, but currently I have to say [XX monastic school] is in a much better shape and condition than the other monastic schools. It is just because they are not aware that they have to do that. And they think, nobody said to them they cannot do that as well, because people are respectful to the monks and they don’t really want to go against or give their opinions to the monk.’ (Thandar Win, MEDG staff member)

\textsuperscript{17} Initially, this analysis aspired to include information of student’s backgrounds to confirm the extent to which monastic schools accept children from different identities, however I was not able to access this type of information. The school management staff in monastic schools and Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU) claimed that they do not keep track of this type of information.
In this quote, the informant referred that even one of the most progressive monastic schools fails to incorporate principles of diversity in their schools. Although there is a sense of recognition that there is a need to cater to children of different ethnic and religious identities, for example, to offer them space for their religious rituals, the informants also reflect on the limitations related to the school management and decisive power of head monks.

Furthermore, informants brought to attention the daily rituals that are incorporated into monastic schools, such as morning prayers, and ‘praising Buddha’ before the beginning of lessons, as depicted in image 5.

![Image 5 Pupils facing the blackboard and chanting Buddhist prayers before the beginning of the lesson. Courtesy of the author.](image)

Thandar Win, MEDG staff member, continued to share her opinion of rituals within monastic schools:

‘This one, I can say that is inclusive. But I am not an expert, so I cannot guarantee but as far as I know almost all monastic schools have different students. But for example, in Meiktila, there was one monk who was keeping students from different areas and different religions. Also, in [XX monastic school] we have students with different religious beliefs as well. And also, in other monastic schools, in Rakhine even they have different students. But the thing is, once you are within the school environment with the majority who believes in one religion, system, or one type of belief. Than people start to feel like they have been left out, or they have been persuaded. I talked to one teacher from Rakhine state who came for NFE (Non-formal education) training and I asked - are there any other people with different beliefs, Christians, or Muslims in their school. But the thing is since the routine in the monastic school, so one of the routines is to pray to Buddha in the morning. So, whether they are Buddhist or not, some of them will tell them to pray to Buddha. And I have to tell like this, it is not correct.’

These types of rituals are an essential part of any religious-based schools; however, monastic schools do not offer children from other religious groups space to practice their own rituals. As emphasized by Thandar Win in this quote, children could feel excluded from Buddhist rituals which could potentially inhibit their sense of belonging to the school community. Furthermore, another informant mentions the danger of persuading non-Buddhist children to convert to Buddhism. Although there is no firm evidence that some monastic schools intentionally persuade children to convert to Buddhism, Kaung Kyaw, local education specialist, shared similar thoughts:

‘In some schools, it depends on the area where the monastery is located. In XX area, they accept children from other religions. I know some school in XX, on the other side of Yangon river, and that school accepts
Muslim children. But that monk, XYZ visit me, and he proudly told me, ‘I create Muslim children into Buddhists.’ So, why, don’t do this. So, he is converting Muslim children into Buddhists. It is good to accept Muslim children to go there but allow them their own religion. Not to try to convert them...I don’t have the exact number, but some, some schools do. Because they think it is a good way to convert over to Buddhism. Some children that have no religion, they are easy to convert to Buddhism. And also, they need approval from their parents, and they can decide for themselves when they grow up. When they are early age, it is not good way to change other people.’

Assumption that monastic schools might have an indoctrinating agenda behind them has been mentioned by other scholars as well (Higgins et al 2016; Lorch 2008), however, only two out of 37 informants spoke openly about this issue. These statements merely remain assumptions without hard evidence to back them up, however, they do depict the complexity of providing schooling within a mono-cultural and religious environment.

7.2. Redistribution
As outlined in the theoretical chapter the dimension of redistribution examines issues of equitable and non-discriminatory access to resources and outcomes for different social groups, particularly marginalized and disadvantaged (Novelli and Sayed 2016). Within the context of monastic schools, this entails looking into several aspects of this dimension (Table 3) including the allocation of material and human resources within the broader education system and distribution of these resources within the monastic education sector itself. In addition, based on observations made at different monastic schools and collected data, an additional aspect of this dimension appeared, i.e. the issue of distribution and access to learning opportunities for teachers and students as well.

**Distribution of Human and Material Resources, and Opportunities Within the Broader Education System**

To begin with, Myanmar’s education sector continues to be chronically underfunded, especially in comparison to other countries in SEA region. In 2012, the government allocated merely 0.5 % of its GDP to basic education, while other Asian countries invest around 4 % of their GDP in their education sectors (Higgins et al 2016). Not surprisingly, monastic schools remain under resourced in terms of material means as well, which strongly impedes schools’ operations and consequently their potential to contribute to social cohesion. During most of the interviews, informants brought up the challenges monastic schools face in securing enough funds for their daily functioning, teacher trainings, and most importantly, teachers’ salaries. Considering these challenges monastic schools face, their role in social cohesion seemed trivial or as mentioned before, not perceived as one of their main priorities.

Most of the informants working within the field of education were distressed about the state’s resistance to allocate sufficient funding to the national education sector, including monastic schools:

‘As a formal education provider, we need a lot of support from the government because the monastic school principal tries to also organize for the teacher salary. For example, if all the monastic schools close, all these 300,000 students have to go to the government schools. So, they have to recruit the teachers, they also have to provide the contribution, textbooks, exercise books, school uniforms. And they also have to provide the school infrastructure as well. If monastic schools exist, they do not need to provide for the school infrastructure, they don’t need to provide for the school uniforms. If monastic schools save the national budget for these 300,000 students, so our government should provide for the teacher salary equally with the government school teacher.’ (Aung Mai, MEDG staff member)
Although this informant works at MEDG and advocates for the development of monastic schools, there was an overall agreement among the informants that the state should offer more financial support to monastic schools, especially for teachers’ salaries, and their professional development. Although MoE has been increasing its support to monastic schools in the past years and currently partially subsidizes salaries of monastic teachers, this does not meet the minimum salary requirement would provide teachers with a decent income. Consequently, there are large inequalities between the salaries of teachers at monastic schools in comparison to teachers employed in the state or private education sectors. In addition, their professional development paths vary greatly, since monastic teachers do not have equal access to teacher trainings in comparison to state teachers.

‘They [teachers] need support from the Ministry of Education. For example, teacher capacity building, management assistance. That kind of activities, monastic schools should be included, in their [government] programmes. For example, if they think, monastic schools need to get that kind of training. So, we now raised our voice and give voice to put our requirements in the national budget.’

(Aung Mai, MEDG staff member)

Thus, within the discussion on lack of support from the government, this informant also emphasizes the lack of formal structures for professional development, especially in comparison to state teachers. Based on observations and conversations with different teachers, monastic schools lack a concrete and clear pathway of teacher professional development. Monastic teachers mainly rely on non-formal opportunities for professional development, which among others, results in the poor quality of their teaching skills.

In addition, monastic schools are known for a high teacher turnover that mainly results from underfunding and low salaries. Keeping in mind the lens of the 4Rs and the dimension of redistribution, these inequalities within the education system, including lack of material resources and unequal opportunities for professional development, inhibit the potential of monastic schools as well as monastic teachers for acting as meaningful actors for social cohesion.

**Allocation of Material Resources and Opportunities within the Monastic Education Sector**

Although the MoE has been increasing its support to monastic schools in the past years, schools continue to source the largest part of funds from local communities, well-wishers, income-generating activities, and foreign donors as well. The amount of funds certain monastic schools manage to collect, largely depends on the schools’ advocacy work, collaboration with MEDG, and the general engagement of the abbot. Based on observations made in the field and informants’ accounts, the schools’ management heavily depends on the work and ‘attitude’ of the head monk. The uncontrolled distribution of financial resources thus creates great inequalities between monastic schools.

‘What I mean, other monastic schools they mostly in the villages, they don’t know how to apply for funding, they do not have an outside donor, it is very difficult for them. But they still need to provide education for children, because children do not have government school...Yes, in terms of quality and the well-known schools have good funding, good teachers and donor support, their children have more opportunities to get quality education. The schools in remote areas, the children do not receive such good education in terms of quality and in terms of equity. So, the poor schools need more support. Donations do not reach schools in remote areas.’ (Kaung Kyaw, local education specialist)

In this conversation, the informant emphasized the problem of the unequal distribution of financial support within the monastic education sector and how this creates inequalities in terms of opportunities teachers receive for their professional development, as well as students’ academic outcomes. Furthermore, I noticed these inequalities and differences during my visits to different
monastic schools. Certain schools could be labelled as privileged in terms of infrastructure, number of teachers, and most importantly, influx of foreign investments. One monastic school is particularly well developed which can be directly linked to the work of its abbot and his reputable position within the Sangha and broader Burmese society. Through the intensive engagement of the head monk with foreign donors and organization, this school enjoys a privileged position in terms of investments and learning opportunities for its staff and students. Because of its close cooperation with foreign organizations, this school offers a wide range of teacher trainings, skill-building workshops, English language courses, and plenty of opportunities to engage with English-speaking foreigners.

However, these opportunities cannot be generalized to other monastic schools, which remain marginalized in terms of foreign funding and learning opportunities. In consequence, the long-term, uneven allocation of material and human resources, as well as learning opportunities for teachers and students from different monastic school result in inequalities in terms of teachers’ and students’ professional, academic, and personal development.

7.3. Representation

The dimension of representation is generally concerned with the political engagement and participation of relevant stakeholders in education governance and decision-making processes at all levels (Novelli et al. 2015). This entails looking into the extent to which education policies and reforms are carried out through an equal participation of state and non-state actors at different levels, including local, national, and global level. Because of the smaller-science of this study, I mainly focused on the national level of decision-making and therefore consulted experts on the participation of monastic schools and their representatives in the consultation and policy-making processes regarding the ongoing reformation of the national education sector.

In addition, I look at school governance at the local level, that is, within the monastic education sector and schools themselves. This aspect came to the fore already during the collection process, because of the prominence and importance of power relations that exist within the monastic education sector and individual schools.

The overall reform process, particularly formation of the NESP (2016-2021), has been criticized for lacking the meaningful inclusion of civil-society actors, including monastic education providers (Vrieze 2017; Bryant 2017). Nevertheless, informants included in this study were positive about changes in education reform processes in the past years, especially in terms of transparency and inclusion and particularly in terms of the governments’ cooperation with monastic schools:

‘Because now we (MEDG) are currently involved in different sub-groups. Ministry of Education, now they set up sub-sector working groups. They are working together with the government and DPs, local NGOs and CSOs. Working together in each group. Before it was not like that, they apply the funding and they operate themselves. But we can’t see the results, no transparency. And now we can see good results, now their approach is to work together with CSOs, NGOs and DPs. MEDG is one of the partners in these groups. They are listening to different voices and they put this input into their plans.’ (Zin Maung, MEDG staff member)

In these discussions, I was curious to know the reason for the increasing interest of the government to include and consult with monastic schools in reform processes. Mainly informants referred to the new democratically elected government and their priority to modernize the education system. However, the core of this increasing participation with monastic schools and civil society actors lied in
external pressure and the government’s objective of complying with requirements from foreign donors:

‘Because the government, the MoE, they already apply for GPE funding. So, the GPE requirements are that this project is not only managed by MoE. GPE requirement is that MoE must work together with CSOs. So, government now invite CSOs and NGOs. This is external influence for the government.’ (Zin Maung, MEDG staff member)

Even though informants often confirmed that the government is striving to include relevant education stakeholders into the consultation processes, the question remains open about the outcomes of these consultations:

‘LN: No, they did not invite our MEDG to consult. They invite us to Yankin education college in Yangon. And there is JICA18, JICA has the leading role to change the curriculum. The first thing is they invite us, ‘oh we want to see how you change the curriculum, can you share with us’, so they invite us, me and our leadership team members. We visit there, and they present what they are going to change the curriculum. It is like that, only once, we can go, and we joined. Only once. But that is just their planning and we make some suggestions and we give feedback. Only once.

M: Are your suggestions considered?

LN: We hope so, but we don’t know. We also don’t know about other questions, what they are doing.’ (Lin Naing, MEDG staff member)

Although Lin Naing confirms that MEDG members are invited to participate in discussions on changes in the curriculum, she also explained that this consultation was a ‘one-time’ event and had a connotation of being a presentation of the predetermined changes, rather than a concrete consultation process. This informant also emphasized the significant role of JICA, which relates again to the influence of external policy requirements and financial investments. Although more extensive research into education reform processes would be necessary, based on informants’ opinion, we can assume that the government has been making positive efforts in including relevant education stakeholders in consultation processes, however the doubt remains whether inputs are meaningfully included in policy outcomes.

Distribution of Power within Monastic Schools

The dimension of representation also looks at political engagement at a local level and in the case of monastic schools this means considering the dynamics of school governance of individual schools. Considering the well-respected and privileged position of Buddhist monks in Burmese society, it does not come as a surprise that monastic schools have a centralized system of school management with the head abbot holding the leading role.

Highly-respected views of monks is easily noticed in Myanmar and informants often confirmed that ‘going against’ or challenging opinion of a monk is considered disrespectful. In the words of one of the informants ‘people are really respectful to the monks and they don’t really want to go against or give their opinions to the monk.’ (Thandar Win, MEDG staff member)

Generally, MEDG staff members often clarified that ‘classroom teachers’ are not directly involved in ‘high level policy making’ which remains a space reserved for school abbots. Teachers themselves

18 JICA (Japanese International Cooperation Agency) is one of the most influential organisations in the reformation of Burmese education system.
confirmed that they are not directly involved or consulted on issues that the MEDG deals with and that they remain rather excluded from consultations within the schools.

Furthermore, in interviews, teachers often implicitly confirmed the existing hierarchical and unbalanced power relations within the schools:

‘TT: We also want to ask but we are... we are under him. Most of the teachers also want to ask [XX abbot]. This is a monastic school, why are novices not allowed.

M: I will make a note, I will ask him [laugh]

TT: [laugh] Yes ask, for all of us.’ (Thein Theth, male teacher)

Although the teacher humorously agreed that I could speak to the principal in the name of teachers, covertly he also indicated that the teachers do not have much voice in decisions-making within the school.

7.4. Reconciliation

While the preceding three ‘Rs’ looked into the cultural, economic, and political dynamics of the Burmese education system and monastic schools from a more ‘structural’ perspective, I perceive the last dimension of reconciliation as more ‘relational’. While conducting interviews in the field, questions related to reconciliation were among the most ‘sensitive’ ones and it was challenging to collect concrete data because of the reluctance of interviewees to discuss topics related to relations between the Buddhist Bamar group and other ethnic and religious groups. Out of respect to informants’ hesitance to openly discuss these topics and issues regarding their safety, I often did not ‘dig deeper’ into these conversations. As a result, this section focuses on one aspect of reconciliation, i.e. vertical trust (in education institutions – monastic schools). The more interpersonal characteristic of reconciliation - the second aspect that investigates horizontal trust (relations between different groups of people) is elaborated in chapter 6 on teacher agency and their roles for social cohesion. Diverse opinions of informants and how they view and relate to other societal groups are individual and unique, hence, cannot be situated within the discussion on the general role of monastic schools in social cohesion.

The dimension of reconciliation demands looking into different levels of trust, including so called vertical trust that considers trust in education institutions. In the case of this study, I was interested to know how people perceive monastic schools and what role they play for their communities.

Firstly, it is important to emphasize that most of the informants that were included in this study belong to the Buddhist Bamar ethnic group and mainly shared positive views on monastic schools. Participants often showed admiration of monasteries as they serve as religious and education centres, offer cost free basic education, language courses, and vocational trainings. In addition, they offer a space for cultural events and ceremonies (weddings for example) and cost-free health care services.

Informants also often spoke highly of the head monk as being the ‘leader of the community’:

‘Principal organizes the development of the school, but he can also organize development of the community as well, or township. If the township requires electricity, it is the monk who organizes to set up the electricity. He organizes the meeting with the government, bodies, and communities. That kind of abilities and support comes from monastic school.’ (Zin Maung, senior male teacher)
Despite being viewed as main centres of their communities, two informants raised an interesting point that offered an insight into perceptions of monastic schools from people who do not belong to the Bamar group. Thein Theth, teacher at a monastic school in Mandalay, shared insights into increasing number of Muslim children withdrawing from monastic schools:

‘TT: Maybe around 2012 most of the Christian and Islamic they also attend the school. When there is conflict...conflict between Muslim and Buddhist... they go out, they throw out of the school, they didn’t want, they didn’t attend.

M: Also, from this school?

TT: Yeah.

M: Do you think this is because of the parents or because of the school, why?

TT: Because of the parents, I think. They are afraid, they are afraid to be killed.

M: Also, in the school?

TT: Yeah. The school is not... most of the schools they didn’t do like that. They make the student not to fight. But the parents are very afraid for their children...After the conflict they didn’t come here. They come to here with the letter that they withdraw from the school.’

On a similar note, Nhaung Thun, a teacher from a different school in Yangon shared similar views:

‘NT: Here in our school, we don’t have any Muslim children, but we do have Hindu. Some Muslim they don’t dare to come to monastic school, because of their mother or father. But, we accept that kind of people, but they don’t want to come by themselves.

M: Does that happen often?

NT: [Lowered volume, almost whispering] Most of the time they don’t come.

M: They don’t want to come because of their parents, or because of religious tensions?

NT: Because of religious tensions, that is why. [sounds he is not inclined to go further into the discussion]

M: Do you see that as a downside, as a problem?

NT: For us it is not a problem. But in their mind, what happened, I don’t know. Like our Buddha always said, ‘We can accept people, good or bad, is okay’. But we give our love to all the students and all the people, equally.’

The issue of Muslims withdrawing their children out of monastic schools is a highly sensitive topic and therefore it was only discussed when informants themselves chose to talk about it in interviews. However, without additional data on school enrolment and drop-out rates, these accounts (alongside informal conversations) only remain assumptions and cannot be generalized across monastic schools. Nevertheless, implicitly they do reveal hidden layers of relationships between different religious groups in the country.

Considering the ‘second dimension’ of social cohesion, as outlined in theoretical framework, sense of belonging or feelings of attachment with certain social entity, play a crucial role in the making of a socially cohesive society (Scheifer and Noll 2016). Sense of belonging and identification with religion is especially important in a country such as Myanmar, where Buddhism is integrated into the national
identity. ‘To be Burmese is to be Buddhist’ is a slogan commonly recognized in Myanmar, especially in these times of rising nationalism in the country (Schober 2017). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind both aspects of social cohesion, i.e. the ‘bonding aspect’ that strengthens ingroup cohesion and ‘bridging aspect’ that contributes to cohesion across different social entities (Cheong et al 2007). Based on observations made at monastic schools which showed that daily rituals of teachers and students have a strong religious character and include daily prayers to Buddha and visits to Buddhist pagodas. Although these daily practices do not necessarily erode social cohesion, they do largely contribute to the bonding aspect of social cohesion that strengthens social bonds within one social group, and less to the bridging aspect that is crucial for social cohesion. Also, based on two conversations described above, we can assume that people who do not belong to the Buddhist Bamar group, do not necessarily view monastic schools as open or trustworthy environments. Although monastic schools tend to present themselves as open and welcoming schools to children from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, other social groups do not necessarily perceive them in the same light.

Competing Nature of the Schooling System

Teachers and education experts often brought up the exam-oriented nature of the national education system during interviews. Although seemingly unrelated to social cohesion, the pressure teachers and students expressed in relation to matriculation exams, indirectly inhibits their potential to foster positive social relations. One of the teachers believes that:

‘Parents want their children to compete in the classroom, they don’t want to work together. The education train them to compete because they declare to compete in the exam grade. After exam we said you got higher mark or I got higher mark and we want to compete if we got low. I don’t think the education teach how to live peacefully. They don’t learn to help each other, sympathies.’ (Khaing Kyaw, male teacher)

According to Davies (2004) and Lopes Cardozo (2008), a competitive schooling environment has the potential to contribute to education in a negative way by promoting rivalry and fear instead of fostering a sense of cooperation, and eventually result in lowered self-esteem of students as well. In addition, most of the monastic schools are eager to implement child-centred teaching styles, however they continue applying rote learning teaching methodologies because of demands within the national education system and orientation towards the academic achievement of students in matriculation exams. This type of learning inhibits students’ potential to develop their critical thinking skills, or in the words of Kaung Kyaw, local education specialist:

‘This system does not allow students to think, only memorizing, memorizing facts. For many years Burmese people have lack of reasoning and critical thinking skills. When they hear rumours, they believe. When rumours spread, they did not think about this, whether this is true or false. They just follow the rumours. Destroy the Muslim, they believe. This is only rumours, people do not think. So, it is easy to persuade people. Because of the lack of critical thinking.’

The long-established practice of rote learning inhibits the development of critical thinking skills, leaving students unable to critically engage with their environment and develop their own opinion in relation to ongoing conflicts. Consequently, this leaves monastic schools with limited space in which they could foster positive social relations and meaningfully contribute to reconciliation.
7.5. Concluding Chapter 7 - Contested Role of Monastic Schools in Social Cohesion

This chapter elaborated four main dimensions of the 4Rs framework separately, however, in practice, especially for the case of monastic schools, these dimensions overlap with potential contradictions as well. Keeping in mind Bush and Saltarelli’s (2000) ‘continuum’ of positive and negative faces of education in conflict-affected areas, the role of monastic schools cannot be clearly pinpointed down on this continuum and remains contested.

To begin with, although monastic schools enjoy a certain degree of autonomy and freedom in comparison to government-led schools, they remain largely integrated into the state’s education system. As confirmed by informants, general acknowledgment, and awareness of potential benefits of linking the field of education and social cohesion is present within the country, however this need remains limited around the language of ‘building citizenship skills, civics, morality’ and ‘having respect for each other’ and not directly linked to social cohesion or peacebuilding. Even though the assertion to ‘use education as a tool to strengthen peaceful coexistence among ethnicities and exchange strategies’ (CESR 2013, 41) can be noticed in the language of education reform policies, in practice and according to informants’ accounts, efforts to concretely link the fields of education and social cohesion are rather absent. Based on comprehensive research on the role of education in peacebuilding, Higgins et al (2015) confirm that the ‘peacebuilding logic seems to be everywhere and nowhere’ in national education reform processes and policy documents. On a similar note to views of informants included in this study, they find that ‘there seems to be a recognition of the need to place education reform process in the actual context of inequalities and frustrations...while it is mostly absent due to the often strategic neglect of the direct connotations to peacebuilding or related terms, or perhaps a lack of awareness and capacity to effectively address the reform process in a conflict-sensitive manner’ (Higgins et al 2016, 71). As a result, the potential of monastic schools remains limited as they remain ingrained in national education and political structures.

Nevertheless, certain informants confirmed that monastic schools do enjoy a certain degree of autonomy and flexibility in terms of how the teachers use the curriculum and build extracurricular activities:

‘Okay, curriculum is like this, we cannot change the curriculum, we cannot change the textbooks, but how can we complement the textbooks, and supplement them with other things, and it is not only about the content, but how is this content used and taught. Of course, there is space. But to really make this happen, you really have to make, you can’t just assume that you give them training, no you really have to, even when you train them, you have to consciously bring empowerment into the training, otherwise, this appreciation of diversity and cohesion, and conflict resolution, it has to be brought it.’ (Myint Nann, female working at a local NGO)

In essence, monastic schools remain limited by the government curriculum, however they also have a certain level of autonomy that offers them space for flexibility which they could use to implement ‘peace related’ topics as additional material to the curriculum or within the scope of extracurricular activities.

However, this space within which monastic schools could act as actors for social cohesion is also limited by the Buddhist monastic order. A fragment of the Sangha believes that monastic schools are not an appropriate space where workshops on diversity and tolerance’ between different religious groups should be promoted. Experience of Thantar Lwin and his attempt to initiate project ‘Diverance’
(Box 4) clearly demonstrates the level of sensitivity and hazard to personal safety accompanying teachers in their efforts to actively engage in processes of social cohesion.

Furthermore, the rather contested role of religious-based organizations in development projects has been discussed in a similar way by Lunn (2009), who labelled them as ‘the ultimate community organizations’ that are able to act as development actors in providing their communities with welfare, relief, and social services and fill gaps caused by insufficient state provision. However, religious organizations have also been viewed with suspicion because in certain cases of humanitarian, social welfare, and development projects, they have been used to legitimise conversion as well (ibid.). Assumptions regarding the persuasion of children to convert to Buddhism within monastic schools has been discussed by several scholars (Higgins et al 2016; Lorch 2008). Lorch (2018) claims that some monastic schools have been set up to counter the efforts of Christian schools and mosques, with the aim of preventing Buddhists to converting to other religions. Also, certain monastic orphanages require that every child who wants to live in the compound wears a Buddhist novice’s robe (ibid.). Although monasteries have been offering education services from the 11th century, one teacher confirmed that the abbot of his school was motivated to open the school by an example of Christian school: ‘he [the abbot] thinks, Christian monk can do for the children, for the country, can help the students, why our Buddhist monks cannot do the same as Christian monks.’ (Aung Ye, monk teacher). Although speculations regarding the indoctrinating agenda in monastic schools have been mentioned by informants in interviews, as well as informal conversations, they still merely remain an assumption.

Official recognition of monastic schools by the government proved to be one of the main controversial points that was brought up by informants, especially when linked to the dimensions of redistribution and representation. During the phase of composing the research proposal for this study and keeping in mind the disadvantaged position of monastic schools and teachers, I was certain that official recognition of monastic schools and consequent increased financial support from the Ministry of Education would be beneficial for improving their daily operation and strengthen their potential to act as agents for social change. After all, monastic schools cater to over 300,000 underprivileged children and enable them to receive an official certificate of completion. Consequently, these children can enrol in state-led schools, continue their education, and are more competitive in the employment market. However, what kind of message does the government send to other religious-based and ethnic schools that remain unacknowledged as official education providers? Considering one of the prerequisites of the 4Rs framework, i.e. ensuring equitable distribution of resources (in this case, access to primary education), monastic schools do make a meaningful contribution in offering education to underprivileged children, as well as children living in remote or conflict-affected areas of the country. However, recognition, as well as increasing financial support from the government (redistribution) and political engagement of MEDG in policy-making processes (representation) need to be situated within the broader education system, and most importantly alongside other religious-based schools. In this sense, the development of the monastic education sector with the help of the government, while depriving other religious schools of equal support, is discriminatory and potentially leads to the exacerbation of inter-religious tensions.

Lastly, issues related to the ‘orientation towards common good’ (or reconciliation) as one of the elements of social cohesion proved as the most sensitive issue in and mostly left out by conversations with informants. However, the current state of conflict in Myanmar, which marks cases of ongoing
violent clashes in ethnic areas and the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya minority, seems at this point very distant from the path of reconciliation.

8. Conclusion
This concluding chapter offers reflection on the theoretical foundations of this thesis and recaps the main findings from each sub-question and how they relate to each other. Generally, this thesis aims to answer the following research question:

*Within the context of Buddhist monastic schools, how do monastic teachers perceive and exercise their roles and agency in supporting Myanmar’s community-based process of social cohesion?*

First, it is crucial to mention that most research participants were not familiar with the terms ‘agency’ and ‘social cohesion’, therefore, in interviews I often used different terms, such as ‘teachers’ perceptions’, ‘community’, ‘living together in peace’, ‘diversity’, etc. This ‘slippery nature’ of these concepts stresses the importance of integrating local understandings and knowledge when exploring these concepts, that are currently limited in Burma or largely inaccessible to foreigners. In result, I allowed this research process, and myself as a researcher, enough flexibility to draw knowledge from different theoretical conceptualizations. This approach also accepted certain ‘gaps’ in data, but from a post-structuralist perspective, these ‘shortcomings’ speak for themselves. The elements of ‘social relations’ and ‘orientation towards common good’ and reconciliation (see conceptual scheme) proved too sensitive to discuss with informants and this reluctance illustrates tensions in Burmese society.
that impede the process of reconciliation. Furthermore, while most of the Western literature still follows agentic and active understanding of agency, the ecological approach to agency-as-achievement proved most suitable for explaining agency of monastic teachers. Nevertheless, this approach was formed to explore teachers’ professional agency instead of linking agency to social cohesion. In this sense, Priestley et al (2015) claim that there are cases when teachers do not exercise agency, while in this thesis I argue that all teachers, especially in conflict-affected areas, always exercise their agency, in certain situations in subtle ways while in other settings and circumstances in more palpable ways.

Keeping these reflections, empirical data and conceptual scheme of the thesis in mind, following conclusion can be made:

*On a macro level, through the lens of 4Rs framework, the role of monastic schools in processes of social cohesion remains contested.*

In terms of access to schooling, monastic schools do play a role in meaningfully filling the gap in the national education system. With an ‘open door’ policy, monastic schools provide education for underprivileged children, children with physical and learning disabilities and children living in remote and conflict-affected areas. In this sense, we can conclude that monastic schools do play a positive role in contributing to social justice in terms of access to education for underprivileged children and children in areas where the government fails to offer basic schooling.

However, while gaining more recognition and financial support from the MoE seems like a positive step forward, it raises alarming issues within the broader education system. Exclusive recognition of monastic schools alongside other religious-based and ethnic schools, which do not receive equal recognition and support does exacerbate existing tensions and erodes social cohesion in the long run.

The dimension of recognition revealed that monastic schools remain a mono-cultural environment that despite the ethnic and religious diversity of students, fails to establish formal structures that would help these groups of children to integrate into the predominantly Buddhist Bamar environment, nor do they acknowledge their differing identity, culture, and language. Consequently, these children are in a disadvantageous position that inhibits their learning potential and academic achievement. Furthermore, according to accounts of certain informants, living and studying within a predominantly Buddhist Bamar environment potentially leads to sense of exclusion or in most extreme cases to the conversion of children to the Buddhist religion.

*Unequal distribution of power within the Buddhist monastic order (the Sangha) and monastic schools restrict teachers’ agency*

School management within monastic schools remains centralized with the head abbot taking the leading role. These highly hierarchical relationships in most cases limit teachers’ voices in decision making and push them into adopting a mainly technocratic style of teaching. However, based on observations and encounters in monastic schools, certain abbots proved to be more progressive and open to new teaching methodologies (e.g. a child centred approach and the development of critical thinking skills). Nevertheless, progressive abbots are rather exceptional cases in comparison to most head monks. Furthermore, although these abbots encourage the idea of engaging their teachers in peacebuilding and social cohesion, their aspirations remain constrained by the national monastic order. The case of project ‘Diverance’ is a clear example of how extremist religious structures not only limit teachers’ agency to act for community-level social cohesion (micro), but also obstruct the process of reconciliation on a national (macro) level.
Monastic schools and monastic teachers cultivate a sense of connectedness (belonging) that largely remains confined to Buddhist (Bamar) group

Informants’ accounts and observations showed that monastic teachers contribute to creating strong bonds within schools and their close communities. However, these bonds mainly stay grounded in the common, Buddhist religion and the majority ethnic group of Bamar people. Monastic schools are perceived as community, cultural, and educational centres within local communities, however people who do not belong to the Buddhist Bamar group, do not necessarily view monastic schools as open or trustworthy environments. Few informants confirmed that a drop out of Muslim children has increased since the exacerbation of inter-religious tensions. In conclusion, monastic schools and teachers mainly contribute to the bonding (intra-group) aspect, and to a lesser extent to the bridging (inter-group) aspect of social cohesion.

Most monastic teachers do not perceive themselves as (direct) agents of social cohesion and exercise their agency for social cohesion in positive and negative ways

Monastic teachers proved to exercise their agency for community-level social cohesion through adopting different roles, namely the role of technocratic teachers, multitaskers (or overworked), direct and indirect agents of social cohesion, and perpetrators of violence. Although these roles overlap depending on a given context, most of the teachers take up roles of technocrats and multitaskers that limit their potential to act as agents for social cohesion. Furthermore, linking teachers’ motivations and agency for social cohesion disclosed that monastic teachers often choose their profession for reasons that indirectly relate to their role of agents for social cohesion. Only a few teachers (3) expressed their motivation for teaching as a channel for bringing change to the education system or transmitting peacebuilding values to younger generations. Lastly, not all teachers have sufficient material or physical (health and energy) resources nor do they aspire to take up on additional roles for social cohesion besides their daily responsibilities.

Most importantly, most teachers interviewed do not perceive themselves as being capable or motivated to contribute to social cohesion. Nevertheless, their part in peacebuilding should not be underestimated, as they continue to (un)consciously, positively, or negatively influence dynamics within their classrooms and communities.
9. Recommendations for Future Research

Although this thesis offers rich and exploratory insights into Buddhist monastic schools and teachers, there are a few aspects that would be worth exploring further. Firstly, some of these aspects are related to the limitations of this study. Because of limited resources for the fieldwork, most of the participants that were included have good level of English speaking skills. This means that voices of certain teachers, without English speaking skills or living in remote rural areas, remain excluded. Therefore, inclusion of monastic schools and teachers from rural areas, with the help of a professional translator would provide more diverse and representative insights.

Secondly, based on experiences and conversations in the field, people that belong to the Buddhist Bamar group tend to be in awe of monastic schools, and that can be based on fearful respect for religious authority, or genuine appreciation. Therefore, including people outside of the Buddhist Bamar group and gathering their insights into the role of monastic schools and teachers in social cohesion would offer an additional layer of information to discussions raised in this study.

Lastly, including other religious based schools, such as Christian and Muslim, and exploring their operation and practices through the lens of social cohesion would offer an interesting comparison to this study. These explorations would also offer valuable information to the issue of the exclusive recognition of monastic schools raised earlier and potentially advocate for more inclusive education processes and policies that are currently being (re)formed on a national level.
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Appendices

Appendix 1 Main Research Locations: Mandalay, Yangon (MM), and Chiang Mai (THA)
PPD&CT WORKSHOP SERIES

PERSONAL + PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS: Co-created workshops for teachers to raise questions about the teaching profession, their personal and professional goals, and development of critical thinking skills.

Facilitator: Melina Merdanović - melina.merdanovic@yahoo.com

Language of communication: English

Number of Participants: 6 (gender balanced group)

Beginning of the course: Week of 13th of November 2017 – exact day and time to be decided.

Entry Requirements: 1. Basic/Intermediate level of English, 2. Short Motivation Letter, 3. Commitment to devote minimal 4 hours per week to the course.

This set of workshops aims to create space for teachers from different departments at (Name Monastic School) to come together to express, reflect and discuss their role of being a teacher in the school and the community and to develop their critical thinking skills. This course will be designed through the process of co-creation with participants, so every participant is invited to propose a list of topics they want to see included in the course.

These workshops will touch upon following questions:

- What is the role of teachers in the school and community?
- What does it mean to be a ‘good teacher’?
- What kind of a teacher do I want to become and how can I achieve it?
- What values and beliefs would I like to bring to my classroom and pass on to my students?
- What does ‘critical thinking’ mean?
- How do we practice ‘critical thinking’ in daily lives?
- What do I think about materials I use in the classroom?

Reading material will be a balanced combination of local and foreign literature:

Thein Lwin – Critical Thinking: The Burmese Traditional Culture of Education
Thein Lwin – Critical Thinking: What, why, how?
Thein Lwin – Teacher Role in Education Transition
Pyi Phyo Kyaw – Critical Thinking in Buddhist Studies: An Introduction
Han Tin – Myanmar Education: Challenges, Prospects and Options
James Baldwin – A Talk to the Teachers
Henry Giroux – Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals
Paulo Freire – *Critical Pedagogy*

**Video Materials:**

Diana Laufenberg – *How to Learn? From Mistakes.*

Christopher Emdin – *Teach Teachers How to Create Magic*

**Potential topics for discussion:**

Myanmar’s role in the world

The role of Education in Myanmar

Politics

National Education Reform

Diversity in Education System

The role of Monastic schools in Myanmar's Education system

Education and Peace

Diversity in the Classroom

Teachers’ role in Education Reform

To join this course, send an email to melina.merdanovic@yahoo.com by Monday 6th of November 2017 with a short motivation letter and list of topics, questions, and material you would like to see included in the programme.
Appendix 3 Interview Guide – Semi-structured Interviews with Teachers

**Personal Information (Identity)**

1. Tell me something about yourself – how old are you and where were you born?
2. Can you describe your family? Do you have any brothers and sisters?
3. What do you parents do for a living?
4. Where did you go to school?
5. What did you want to become when you were a child?
6. Who are the three most inspirational people in your life?

**Motivation**

7. How come you decided to become a teacher?
8. How come you decided to become a teacher at a monastic school?

**Professional Development**

9. How long have you been teaching?
10. To work as a teacher, did you attend any teacher trainings?

**Teachers and community**

11. How does Myanmar society see teachers? What role do teachers play in Myanmar?
12. What do you want to contribute to your community as a teacher?

**Peacebuilding**

13. How would peace in Myanmar look to you?
14. Diversity in monastic schools- do you also have students from different ethnic and religious groups at this school?
15. Can teachers contribute to more peace in Myanmar?

**Trust (optional)**

16. How would you evaluate trust in Myanmar society – between people? Between Bamar, what about to other religious and ethnic groups?

**Representation – 4RS**

17. Are you familiar with the national education reform?

**Redistribution – 4Rs**

18. Are you satisfied with your salary?
19. Do you do some extra work besides teaching at the school?

**Future aspirations**

20. What are your dreams for the future?
21. Did you ever consider teaching at a private or government school? Why / Why not?
Appendix 4 Interview Guide – Semi-structured Interviews with MEDG Staff Members

1. What is your role in MEDG?
2. Could you please draw (make a map for me) of important organizations for monastic schools? Which organizations or bodies represent monastic education sector?
3. Are teachers included in these organizations?
4. Do you have any group meetings with the teachers?
5. Do teachers have any opportunities to join any of these organizations?
6. Are teachers consulted on important issues related to their work? For example, are they informed about Monastic Education Law that is being drafted and National Education Reform that is taking place?
7. How are teachers chosen / recruited?
8. Why do teachers need to work in the office for three months before they begin with teaching?
9. Recognition of monastic schools from the government and their growing support – Do you see government support beneficial? Do you want to have more support from the government? In case if you do get more support from the government – what kind of changes would this bring to monastic schools?
10. What is your view on teaching diversity in monastic schools, especially when it comes to ethnic and religious diversity?
11. Monastic schools claim to be open to accepting all the children, regardless of their race and ethnicity. How is this in practice?
12. Do children get a chance to learn about other religions and ethnicities? Within or outside of the curriculum?
13. In PDO there are separate dorms for children from different ethnic groups – what is the reason for this? How does this division influence social dynamics within the school?
What role do monastic schools play in Myanmar’s processes of social cohesion?

Path to sustainable social cohesion includes 4 dimensions*:

- Recognition of monastic schools as a relevant actor for building social cohesion: There is a general lack of awareness that education institutions, including monastic schools, play an important role for social cohesion.
- Adverse effects of exclusive recognition: Exclusive recognition of monastic schools alongside other faith-based schools could lead to potential tensions within Burmese society.
- Recognition of diversity within monastic schools: Monastic schools are accessible to children from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, however the diversity teachings are not included in school environment, rituals, and learning materials.
- Chronic under-sourcing of education sector: Myanmar’s national education expenditure has been increasing in the past years, yet it remains low, especially in comparison to other countries in the region of SEA. Hence, monastic schools prioritize other issues, such as securing funding, teacher trainings, teacher retention, over strengthening social cohesion.
- Accessibility: Monastic schools fill the gap in Myanmar’s education system in areas where the government failed to provide education services. Monastic schools offer cost-free schooling to over 300,000 underprivileged children from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

- Monastic school remain relatively excluded from national education reform consultations, alongside other relevant civil society organizations.
- Teacher governance remains centralized with head abbots playing the leading role within monastic school and community. Hence, head abbots play a significant role in enhancing or limiting monastic schools’ potential for strengthening social cohesion.
- Lack of political will, diversity awareness, alongside structural and religious limitations, inhibit monastic schools’ potential for cultivating reconciliation.