Sustainable Peacebuilding and Social Justice in Times of Transition: 
Findings on the Role of Education in Myanmar

Chapter 6 – Understanding the Changing Roles of Teachers in Transitional Myanmar

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Abstract
Positioning teachers in contemporary Myanmar, this chapter highlights the varying perceptions of teachers including a focus on teachers’ own perspectives of their roles and duties, giving emphasis to the gendered nature of the profession. The chapter goes on to explore current dimensions of teachers’ practice which influence the positions they occupy, including the evolving practice of after-school tuition, preparation for teaching and the teaching of history. These varied dimensions of teachers’ roles are then related to teachers’ agency for peacebuilding, leading to a discussion of the experience of teachers in conflict and their opportunities to promote peace.

Introduction
Within the context of Myanmar, teachers’ space for manoeuvre as peacebuilders has been constrained and conditioned by a variety of issues. These include factors that may restrict teachers’ opportunities to contribute towards peacebuilding in the classroom and create inclusive learning environments such as the timetables, assessment models and curricula they work with. However, beyond teachers’ own practice, they also find themselves perceived and framed differently by a range of actors within education policy discourses, and frequently instrumentalised within the structure of the highly centralised state education system, which equally contribute to limiting contributions to building peace rather than exacerbating tensions. However, despite the many shared influences which constrain teachers’ positions, individual teachers themselves express a wide variety of motivations, aspirations, experiences and practices that belie a unified conceptualisation of their agency. In this chapter we examine these varying roles, perspectives and positions for teachers across Myanmar’s education systems, with a particular focus on the experiences of government school and MNEC school teachers as they adapt to the changing educational and post-conflict landscape of Mon State. We go on to relate these experiences to opportunities for promoting peace and social justice, looking in detail at the history curriculum and processes of curriculum reform as offering opportunities to address historical tensions and inequalities.

Our research data was gathered between January and April 2015, with the school year ending in March, resulting in a limited timeframe to engage with ongoing school practices. As a result, data was largely not gathered through observations within classrooms, but occurred through interviews and small group discussions conducted both within and beyond the bounds of learning institutions. These interviews included: members of the Ministry of

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Education; government school teachers, head teachers and Township Education Officers from two townships in Mon state; MNEC school teachers and head teachers from three townships in Mon state; teacher educators and university lecturers in the Yangon region; group discussions with community education teachers from seven states; the head of a monastic school; representatives of teacher unions and the NNER; and national and international staff of (I)NGOs and international agencies conducting teacher training and education support as well as engaged in education reform and drafting the NESP. The research presented in this chapter therefore draws from interviews and group discussions with 115 respondents.

Beginning with an overview of the position of teachers in contemporary Myanmar society, the subsequent section draws attention to the interlinked dimensions of the gendered nature of the teaching profession, the influence of low salaries in contributing to teachers’ motivations and attitudes towards their roles, and the widespread practice by many school teachers of after-school tuition.

Positioning Teachers in Contemporary Myanmar
Traditionally in Myanmar, teachers have been held in high esteem within communities, and students are expected to hold a similar level of respect for their teachers as they do for the Sangha and their parents. Concurrently, teaching has long been viewed as a profession of goodwill, interest and self-sacrifice (Lwin 2000; Tin 2000). The status of the profession, however, has been undermined by the chronic underinvestment in the education sector as a whole. Nonetheless, the traditionally high status afforded to teachers within the country’s rigid social structures creates strong hierarchies between teachers and students, with the latter expected to be subservient to their teachers. Teaching practices have generally followed teacher-centred and authoritarian pedagogies, with a prominence of rote learning, instruction and replication rather than learner-centred or participatory approaches. As it is generally seen as inappropriate for students to engage in dialogue or shared decision-making with their teachers, this creates significant challenges to shift classroom pedagogy towards more child-friendly practices. Tin (2000) notes that teachers as a group have been, “highly conservative and traditionalist” (115), and resisted attempts to shift pedagogy away from rote learning. Lall (2011) however, in exploring the more recent push of child-centred pedagogies by international agencies within monastic schools, revealed a more nuanced picture, suggesting that this conservatism is of a principled nature. Namely, the belief of teachers, parents, and head monks, is that a ‘western approach’ serves to undermine the traditional hierarchical structures of respect for teachers and elders, and potentially could create a culture clash in homes and classrooms if implemented. Such beliefs have also led to a resistance on the part of teachers to changing practices of corporal punishment, which are still widespread, inside classrooms (UNICEF 2012). With diverging presentations of teachers’ roles and positions, the sections below examine some of the influencing factors affecting teachers before exploring the varied perceptions encountered in the research.

Gender and Teaching
Teaching in Myanmar is a highly gendered profession, with over 80% of teachers in the state sector being women (MoE 2013), with the result that there may be “in many schools, [only] one or two or three male teachers” (int. 19). Issues of gender and expected roles for men and
women are therefore closely related to teaching practices and have implications for the perceptions of teachers and their duties as well as for understanding policy impact such as in deployment. Gender hierarchies are also reproduced in the sector, with the result that although there is a high proportion of female teachers at primary, middle and high school levels, amongst head teachers the proportion drops (MoE 2013), and more senior positions are commonly held by men. This pattern was also evident in the research process, with the majority of teachers interviewed being female, head teachers interviewed reflecting a more even balance and township education officers being predominantly male.

Many attributed the high numbers of women in teaching to the low salaries of the profession which has contributed to a lowering of the status traditionally afforded teachers. One teacher educator explained:

In Myanmar, mostly teachers are women. I think because of salary. Men are the leaders of their families. So they should get high salaries, but in Myanmar teacher salaries are very low. So mostly men don't want to take teachers' duty. (int. 19)

This was also perceived to have been exacerbated over the last decade, as one retired male teacher reflected on the feminization of the teaching profession he had witnessed:

Most of the teachers are women and there are few men...it is very rare to find [male teachers], you see. [At] the time we are working, because when I joined the education department, I worked as a senior assistant teacher, [at] that time, there are a lot of men joining education, now you see the situation quite different. And [now] only women are joining, most of the people who are joining teacher professions are women. Men are not joining, because men are joining other professions or other area which is more like, financially more resourceful or something like that. So they are seeking such kind of jobs, you see. (int. 16)

Inequalities in status between male and female teachers were identified by several teachers interviewed, with some female state teachers identifying the process of deployment (discussed further in Chapter 7) as particularly disadvantageous. With teachers being deployed arbitrarily around the country once they have completed training, some female teachers reported feeling insecure in unfamiliar and remote areas (int. 122). Undertaking a teaching post in a remote or conflict-affected area was identified as a route to promotion, and consequently women felt disadvantaged in their career development where male teachers were more likely to be willing to take up or remain in such postings (ints. 122 and 123). The vulnerability of (particularly female) teachers to violence is also further explored below.

Beyond the state sector, high numbers of female teachers are also evident in ethnic and community education sectors, as one Mon teacher working in the MNEC sector highlighted:

[For] MNEC about more than 90%, maybe 95% or 98% of the teachers are women. So they only have some point percent of [male] teachers at Mon national schools, among 800 teachers, maybe about 10 or 20 male teachers. (int. 52)

Again, low salaries were identified as a source of the feminization of the profession and an obstacle for women’s equality both within society and within the family as female teachers were dependent on financial support. The same Mon teacher continued: “We want …
supporting salaries. That’s not enough. If women have not enough income, then how can they support their family?” (int. 52). Additionally, as many ethnic education systems are associated closely with ethnic armed groups and the struggle for auto-determination, ethnic schools have been identified as an accepted sphere for the female contribution to ethnic nation-building, which has reinforced the perception of teaching as a female role (Laungaramsri 2011; Maber 2016).

In the monastic sector, however, although many teachers come from the surrounding community and may be male or female, the masculine environment of the monastery and greater numbers of monks teaching leads this sector to be seen as more male dominated than other teaching contexts. In urban areas where there may be greater variety of available schooling options the effect of this masculinization may be limited (int. 15), as is apparent in the case study in Mawlamyine discussed in Chapter 8. However, in rural and remote areas girls and their parents can be less likely to consider monastic schools as welcoming learning environments limiting their educational pathways (ints. 4 and 23). Reflecting religious hierarchies, nuns do not occupy the same position of status within the community as monks, leaving the few nunnery schools that exist severely underfunded and lacking donations, with nuns teaching often without any access to training (int. 23).

**The Influence of Low Salaries**

Teacher salaries, as discussed in Chapter 5, while raised in recent years continue to be inadequate for many teachers to sustain an independent living. Prior to 2009, a primary school teacher’s salary averaged around only 30,000 kyat ($22) per month, increasing to 40,000 kyat ($30) per month for senior middle school teachers (World Bank 2015, 50). Annual increases in salaries since 2011 have seen these figures rise to an average of approximately 90,000 kyat ($67) per month for primary teachers and 145,000 kyat ($107) per month for senior middle school teachers by 2015 (World Bank 2015, 50). While the increase is significant, the monthly salaries nonetheless remain low and this pattern of low pay has compelled many teachers to take second jobs or to offer private after-school tutorials for a fee (UNICEF 2012) (further discussed below). Many rural families provide supplementary support to teachers in order to retain them, including additional salary, food, living quarters, water and firewood. However, this additional support for teachers located in remote regions has generally remained insufficient, and such communities suffer high rates of teacher attrition (UNICEF 2012). In some cases, teachers have sought bribes or favours from students to pass examinations, an issue that Tin (2000) suggests serves to undermine the traditional value and status placed on the profession.

A strong sense of duty and of performing a service was expressed by several teachers and teacher educators participating in the research. This was articulated both in relation to a Buddhist philosophical approach to teaching as moral guidance (ints. 19 and 106) and as a service to the community irrespective of religion (int. 124). For some Buddhist teacher educators, teaching this understanding of duty to trainee teachers was also seen as a service to the nation aligned with a sense of patriotism, as one female teacher educator expressed: “I shall train them how to behave in the classroom, how to nurture the pupils, how to love our spirit, how to love Myanmar culture” (int. 19). The same teacher educator continued:
We all have low salary in education but we are used to this. So it is not important for us. So it is a factor for life but we've taken into account for salary. As well as my students, I always see that salary is very low, maybe low but we contribute our knowledge and practice as [best] we can. (int. 19)

This view of the role of teachers also led some more senior members of the teaching profession to express a certain suspicion of the current education reforms, associating them with a loss of dedication to service amongst teachers that was strongly linked to Buddhist notions of the teacher. As one senior teacher educator, now leading a resource centre, lamented: “Teachers are motivated now by salary. It’s a job where you can get an easy salary, now that salaries have increased. They are not motivated by duty [anymore]” (int. 106). Such opinions reflect the impact of policy reform in changing the nature of the teaching profession and again point to the wide variety of conceptualisations that teachers bring to their own roles.

Further reform implications were hinted at in relation to the gendered nature of the teaching profession, where the majority of teachers and teacher educators are female. Anecdotally, it appeared that more male trainee teachers were applying to the education colleges in 2015 compared to previous years, with teacher educators speculating that they may have been attracted by the salary increase for teachers (int. 102). Follow up research will be required in the coming years to verify if this pattern is confirmed and to further explore the gender implications of such a shift for the profession.

The Practice of Tuition
The practice of offering private after-school classes is widespread in Myanmar, with many teachers offering tutoring to students in their homes or in informal private schools from primary through to high school grades. The practice has also very recently spread to higher education institutions, with students seeking private classes as an alternative to attending university lectures. One student recounted arriving for a university lecture to find that he was the only student in attendance and, not wanting to disturb his teacher who was working on the computer, he quietly left (int. 113). Such an alteration of the expected roles of teacher and student therefore has significant implications for the relationship of trust between teacher and learner.

In two separate discussions, a small group of teachers and a group of recent high school graduates in Yangon were asked about their experiences teaching and attending private tuition classes after school hours. Amongst teachers, tutoring was viewed as integral to the academic system to support unrealistic assessment targets: “almost all of the students in our country depend on these tuition classes in order to achieve success in their academic years” (int. 112). One teacher also highlighted the pedagogical freedom offered by private classes in comparison to what she perceived to be the constraining environment of the state school. However, the potential for private classes to undermine the role of teachers in the state system was also clear: “on the other hand, teachers may rather pay greater attention on their private ones than teaching at school” (int. 112). Anecdotes are numerous of teachers withholding teaching from their formal classes in order to encourage students to attend tuition, or not passing students who failed to attend paid classes (ints. 4, 16 and 125). The
most commonly identified motivation is the need to supplement meagre teacher salaries, supported by those interviewed who encouraged reform as a way to alleviate the pressures:

In fact, I hate such tuition. But academic staff are broke with the government salary only. So it should be all inclusive and integrated approach to reform the best custom. (int. 112)

Teacher trainers were also critical of the practice, seeing it as eroding their authority as skilled professionals, and identifying students and parents as driving the expansion of tutoring by desiring ‘answers’ for the rigid assessment system:

It’s also from the students’ side, because they only want a short cut that they want to memorize. So [the] easy way, I mean. [...] And then, in order to pass the exam, they [...] prefer the private tuitions. (int. 19)

Conversely, although overall it is hoped they could manage without it, students themselves had mixed views of attending tuitions. Sharing the view of some teachers on the positive learning environment, some students appreciated the close attention they got from teachers in private classes arguing that “more attention can be gained by teachers in private tuition due to the smaller size of it compared to school and university” (int. 113). However, they also identified the practice as undermining teachers’ roles as well as the relationship between teacher and student:

If a student [relies too much] on private tuition, there will be lack of respect between students and teachers at school since students won’t pay much attention on what they have been taught at school, and teachers also might not teach well by assuming that they will be taught at private tuition, which is also somehow related to the unethical behaviour of both students and teacher. (int. 113)

Some students additionally responded with sensitivity to their teachers’ positions, showing they were aware of the financial motivations behind the extra classes and were sympathetic to their teachers’ situations: “since the paid salary is a bit lower than it should be, it is necessary for them to make money by means of private classes” (int. 113). Equally, students identified the potential for reform in the education system to reduce the need for tutoring. The hope then, for both students and teachers alike, is that education reforms can promote more egalitarian teaching practices.

Varying Perceptions of Teachers’ Roles

In addition to the influences which impact on teachers’ positions within society as highlighted above, teachers are also perceived differently by different actors, particularly in the context of the education reforms instigated by the USDP government of 2011-16. These framings have a tendency to amalgamate teachers into a homogenous group, which can have dual implications in both obscuring the varying practices and experiences of diversely motivated teachers, and also projecting a unified presentation of teachers’ identities which excludes those who fall outside this vision. The sections below explore these contrasting presentations of teachers, first as they emerge from policy discourses around the education sector reforms and subsequently as teachers and teacher educators themselves expressed their roles.
Framing Teachers in Policy Discourse

Within the current education reforms we see multiple framings of teacher roles, but frequently without acknowledgement of their varied identities, capacity and agency. So in the context of the ‘Quick Wins’ platform, discussed in Chapter 5, 30,000 primary teachers have been deployed around the country as daily-wage teachers with very limited training as preparation. Such responses to the acute shortage of teachers, especially in remote and conflict-affected areas, are generally welcomed. However, the implication that pressures on schools will be eased merely with more individuals in classrooms, without acknowledging the skills those teachers require, may be problematic. Likewise, questions have emerged as to who is categorized as a teacher. The National Education Law, originally passed in September 2014, defines a teacher as “someone sufficiently qualified and who teaches a particular level or standard of education” (Union of Myanmar 2014, translated). The fact that the many teachers beyond the government schooling system, in monastic, community and parallel ethnic education sectors are largely without formal training (further discussed in Chapters 7 and 8), renders this categorization of teachers contentious and exclusive. Likewise, there is a failure to acknowledge or address discriminatory structures that allow access to teacher training programmes, as highlighted by one national trainer working within an international organisation:

Something that comes up outstanding in Rakhine is the issue of teachers' bias in conflict-[affected] populations. This is really difficult because there is a lot of [discrimination]. Some are teaches as well and in Rakhine in most places, the Muslims can't be teachers, either having been trained as teachers or more important those policies, legal blockages to Muslim people entering civil service. (int. 77)

The exclusive nature of civil service and teacher education has implications for multiple marginalised groups, who fail to see themselves represented within education structures. Disabled students and young adults similarly drew attention to the fact that people with disabilities are not permitted to enrol in teacher training, leading to an absence of any teachers with disabilities within state schools (int. 126). This lack of representation is further compounded by a lack of attention to the needs of students with disabilities within teacher education programmes, reinforcing the perpetuation of learning environments that frequently fail to be inclusive of marginalised groups.

In general, perceptions of teachers as individuals are vastly lacking in discourses, with the result that teachers continue to be instrumentalised within the education system. This tendency neglects the vast differences between teachers’ practices, which most directly affect students’ experiences in schools. One cause identified by a former teacher and teacher educator was the lack of monitoring:

When the technical monitoring team came to those school, their focus is not on what is really happening in the classroom, teaching - learning process. And their focus is on what kind of material the school has and so on, you see. (int. 16)

Consequently, the reality for students in school with regard to the quality of teaching they receive can be underappreciated. For teacher policy planning therefore, a major challenge lies in addressing these vast variations in practice where there is often little information available. The highly different contexts for schools in terms of geographical situation, security, resources, personnel and student composition, are also not readily understood by
international actors, often on short term assignments and in the absence of significant qualitative data (int. 79). This has led to some frustration at the large numbers of international consultants connected to the CESR and the drafting of the NESP, which, while drawing heavily on a global understanding of teacher policy and sector planning, has not always been perceived as sufficiently contextualized (ints. 79 and 110).

**Teachers’ Own Perceptions of Their Roles**

In comparison to the homogenising view of teachers that can appear in both policy and popular discourse, teachers themselves highlighted the varied nature of teachers as individuals, often citing observed ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviour amongst colleagues (ints. 16, 19 and 20). It is also apparent that teaching is not a static profession as teachers often held multiple roles and individuals, particularly in ethnic schools and community settings, had often worked in different spheres before becoming teachers (ints. 17, 23 and 124). Likewise, particularly in the government sector, many teachers left the profession after a few years, or changed position to work more broadly on education or development issues beyond the classroom (ints. 103, 110, 122 and 123).

While teachers expressed differing motivations for their work, a frequent recurrence within discussions amongst teachers in both Yangon and Mon State were tensions between what they hoped for their role and the practicalities of the tasks they faced. Reflecting the traditional position of teachers within Myanmar society, teachers across the range of school systems viewed themselves as leaders in their communities, as this teacher trainer in Yangon expressed:

*We are community leaders, I think. So not only teaching in the schools is important but also leadership role in community is a bit important.* (int. 19)

This was articulated as a source of opportunity, but was hindered by the additional tasks teachers felt they were burdened with. Teachers from primary level to university lecturers were exasperated by the demands placed on their time beyond the roles they saw for themselves as teachers. Teachers felt exhausted by the dense curriculum that allows little space for creativity (ints. 20 and 21), and by non-teaching tasks that include overseeing car parking and patrolling school grounds (ints. 100 and 110). This was also particularly a problem for university lecturers who were unable to undertake research as their teaching and administrative tasks were so heavy, leading one lecturer to comment “teachers are security guards now!” (int. 110). Older teachers expressed sympathy for their younger colleagues as demands were seen to have increased: “they don’t have time to prepare for their lessons, so they are just entering the classroom without any preparation” (int. 16). Internationally supported training, techniques and additional subjects such as life-skills were also sometimes seen as merely adding to this workload (ints. 93 and 110). As one government school teacher in rural Mon state confessed:

*Sometimes the new techniques we are learning now are complicated and we don’t know what to do. Only when the monitor comes do we prepare records – for their sake, we are not really doing it. Teachers are too tired so they cannot row the boat.* (int. 93)
Additionally, as further discussed below, the perception of the respected status of the teaching practice, despite low salaries, may accentuate the frustration that some government school teachers expressed when feeling their position was not welcome in a community (int. 16) or their authority not respected by students (ints. 19 and 20).

**Perspectives on Teacher Preparation**

While teacher education will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 7, the perspectives of teacher educators and teachers from varying sectors on the preparation and support for their roles also resonate with the ways in which teacher practice is understood. Consequently, a brief discussion of teachers’ experiences of training is included here before examining accounts of observed teacher practice in the classroom.

Generally, teachers at primary schools are trained at Education Collages and have completed the two-year Diploma in Education. To qualify to teach at the upper secondary level, government teachers are required to attend the five year bachelor degree in education (B.Ed.) course (recently increased from four years) provided by one of the two Universities of Education in Yangon and Sagaing, in comparison to lower grade teachers who can train at one of the 22 Teacher Education Colleges around the country. Once qualified, teachers may be deployed to teach at any location across the country, with limited influence over where they might be placed². Likewise, those teachers who have completed their bachelor degree in B.Ed. are appointed at middle or high schools regardless of their preferred specialism, as highlighted in the text box below.

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² This has led to reports of teachers offering financial incentives to those within the administration so that they might be allocated a post in their preferred location (int. 122).
A former teacher’s account of her training

Researcher with the Research Consortium and co-author, Hla Win May Oo, here writes of her experiences training as a school teacher in 2001-5.

Upon the successful completion of my matriculation exam, I joined the Yangon Institute of Education (IoE), which is now renamed as the Yangon University of Education, in 2001, at the age of 17. There are two Universities of Education in Myanmar, one in Yangon and one in Sagaing. I transferred to Yangon IoE from Sagaing IoE as the latter is very far away from Sagaing Town due to transportation problems and other shortages (as it was newly established at that time).

There were only 48 of us who met the criteria to join the IoE directly right after the matriculation (called direct intake). There were only a few direct intake candidates at that time. Before then, the candidates at the Institutes of Education had been those who had finished their Diploma in Education at an education collage and had some years of experiences in the primary schools (called College of Education, or COE, intake). So there were still a great deal of COE intake trainees. In 2002, it went on like this, but later on, they started allowing more direct intake trainees.

The B.Ed course in our days was a four-year program. Now it takes five years to complete it. During the first two years, we studied all the subjects like Myanmar, English, Mathematics, and any two of those science or arts subjects; from Chemistry, Physics and Biology if you specialized in Science, whereas for those who were Arts majors, they were to choose any two from History, Economics and Geography. There was no one taking any arts subjects in my batch.

During the third and fourth years, we went on studying our chosen two science/arts subjects and we were to major in only one from the other subjects (Myanmar, English or Mathematics). Those above mentioned subjects are called academic subjects, and we also studied educational subjects such as Educational Psychology, Educational Theory, Educational Administration, Educational Statistics and Educational Methodology, etc. There are also PGDMA (Post-graduate Diploma in Multi-media Aided Teaching) and PGDT (Post-graduate Diploma in Teaching) offered at Yangon Institute of Education. Any graduates can take the entrance exam and upon passing this, they can join these courses. If they are assigned at schools where there are no multi-media aids like computers, they become teachers who teach the subjects for which there are no teachers assigned.

Despite your specialization at the institute, you are required to teach any subjects that you are assigned by the principal when you become a teacher at a basic education school. I have some science specialized friends having to teach arts subjects and English majored ones teaching Myanmar and so on. Those who were not happy with it ended up resigning from their teaching posts. Upon completion of the B.Ed, the trained teachers are appointed nationwide. There are some drop-out teachers, meaning they don’t work at government basic education schools, due to transportation problems and lack of safety at the remote areas. I am one of those drop-out teachers. Some of my juniors dropped out after working for some months or a year due to the practices of the principals and education officers which they found unbearable or unacceptable.

The logistics, upheaval and expense of undertaking such training can make it difficult for aspiring teachers from ethnic minority and rural areas to access these institutions. As a result, the correct or incorrect association of government school teachers as belonging to the majority (Bamar, Buddhist) population is further reinforced, often leading to such teachers being perceived as outsiders in the areas they are deployed. One teacher educator had observed a stark contrast between the ways in which community teachers and government
teachers were welcomed within the same township, highlighting tensions between teachers resulting from deployment practices:

The community love [the local community teachers] and they also provide them residential quarters and also something to eat and whatever they have. And when such kind of things are happening, government appointed teachers said they should also... the community should also support them in that way. But they are not, you see, treating children in the way that community appointed teachers are doing. So... there are some kind of conflicts in some areas. (int. 16)

Differences between teachers working in the various education sectors were further highlighted by education practitioners’ own contrasting views of teachers’ practices. Within the ethnic education sector there was a pride expressed by teachers and head teachers that their pedagogical approaches to teaching were more progressive and sensitive to student needs than in the government schools, as one MNEC head teacher explained:

For the assessment, in our project township, we include more about children participation and their feelings. Now, in the exam, when we ask them to write about the plants that grow in the water, the students can write what they know not exactly from the textbooks ... even the township officer give the guideline to focus on the children feelings and opinions and participation and we give marks on that. The students here can express their own opinion and we don’t have limitation for their answers. (int. 60)

This also reflects the conclusions of research conducted on contrasting student experiences in formal state and non-formal community learning environments, where students characterized their interactions with state school teachers as dominated by fear (Maber 2016). In contrast, learning experiences in community education environments, in this case provided by ethnic-affiliated women’s organisations, were appreciated because of the more egalitarian relationship with teachers, where students felt more confident to ask questions and to share ‘teaching’ roles within the classroom with their peers (Maber 2016).

Discussions of the perceptions of teacher roles and practices amongst teacher educators also revealed perspectives and examples of observed practice amongst teachers that are rarely reflected within either policy or literature, and which demonstrated a widely differing spectrum of behaviour. One example had been witnessed of a teacher displaying the results of the class examination months before students had taken the test:

So I asked the headmistress ‘the examination is only going to take place in February and the result is already there [in September]. Why do [it] like that?’ She said ‘because when we announce that list, pass list, it is the same whether it is now or whether it is in February’. (int. 16)

In this scenario, teachers demonstrated a casual disregard for the potential of their students to learn and develop. However, as illustrated in the text box below, other observations were cited of government teachers who had developed strategies for mutual language learning with students in ethnic minority areas, learning selected phrases from students’ mother-tongue language to aid communication in class, or voluntarily teaching language classes or agricultural skills before or after the school days according to the needs of their students (int. 16). Likewise, Township Education Officers were encountered in Mon State who encouraged mutual language learning in their schools (int. 39). Such examples of cooperation in schools
Across ethnic divides were present, but had often gone unnoticed amid a climate of limited shared information (int. 89).

**A teacher trainer’s account of observing plural language use**

With over 100 different languages spoken in Myanmar and many in ethnic territories not speaking the official national language of Burmese, the issue of language of instruction in classrooms has been a central tension in education policy (South & Lall 2016). However, the practices of individual teachers within formal classrooms may facilitate moments of smoothing through introducing opportunities for multi-directional language learning.

Interviewed in Yangon, a senior teacher trainer who had spent two decades training in the state education sector, reflected on an instance he had observed while travelling to monitor teacher progress in state schools, which highlighted strategies employed by individual teachers in working with multiple languages in the classroom. The experienced trainer recounted observing a newly qualified state school teacher who was deployed to Shan State repeating the two phrases she had learned in Pa-Oh language:

> How do you call it in Pa-Oh? [and] This is called --- in Myanmar. So she learned only that ...two phrases and she started communicating with the children. (int. 16)

In so doing, the teacher not only encouraged Burmese language learning amongst her students but also placed herself within the frame of learning as a student of Pa-Oh language, creating a momentary disruption in the hierarchy of the class. The teacher trainer continued, explaining the strategies of the observed teacher in seeking to support horizontal learning between students:

> Another thing is she also asked the parents, saying ‘I would like to teach your children how to speak in Myanmar language. Can you send your children one hour ahead in the morning and also one hour ahead in the evening?’ So people are very pleased. So they are sent one hour ahead and she organized such kind of meeting. (int. 16)

In these extra classes before and after the school day the teacher encouraged students of varied ages to practice their Myanmar language together and learn practical phrases from each other. The anecdote illustrates the continued possibilities to undo fixed roles, albeit briefly, which persist even within highly constrained environments. However, the structure of school days is unyielding in this case, and consequently the teacher resorts to creating these moments for alternative peer learning beyond the framework of the school day. Likewise, although the teacher is herself attempting to build connections through reciprocal learning of Pa-Oh language, the educational policies prioritising the promotion of Burmese (and in some cases English) as the language of instruction, curriculum and assessment remain unchanged. Such practices therefore remain dependent on the nature and inclination of individual teachers, rather than affecting institutional change, as the teacher trainer recounting the observation reflected: “she got this kind of idea [herself], she didn’t get it from the training” (int. 16). Nonetheless, these alternative relationships will be carried through in the course of the day, potentially enacting small changes in the learning experiences of the individual students.

The varied practices of individual teachers, as well as the differences in position and motivation between teachers working in the different education systems, have significant impact in contributing to inclusive or exclusionary environments for learners within the classroom. In situations of conflict, these practices can have substantial implications for contributing to tensions or to promoting reconciliation. Consequently, the following sections examine in more detail the roles and specific situations between conflict and peace of teachers participating in the research.
**Between Conflict and Peace**
As expectations of the roles and practices of teachers vary, so likewise the opportunities for teachers to contribute positively to peacebuilding are also varied and frequently constrained. Reflecting the dual potential for education in conflict-affected contexts to exacerbate tensions or to contribute to peacebuilding (Davies 2010; Bush & Salterelli 2000), the multiple dimensions of teachers’ identities, skills and practices within the different education system can likewise support or hinder peacebuilding. Additionally, teachers may themselves be targets of violence and the precarity of their situation leads to increased insecurity in their position. The subsequent sections explore these dimensions of teachers’ positions between conflict and peace, concluding with an exploration of the subject of history teaching as expressed by government and MNEC school teachers in Mon State.

**Navigating Experiences of Violence**
Given the nature of teacher deployment across the country, the vulnerability of teachers to direct violence in conflict where they may be isolated from familial and social support networks was raised by several teachers and trainers (int. 15), and also intersects with the gendered nature of the profession, as discussed above. As many teachers are women, they expressed a vulnerability when being placed in remote or conflict-affected areas that they were unfamiliar with (int. 122). While some teachers reported a great sense of connection to their community environments when teaching, and saw these as a source of support (ints. 16, 20 and 21), others felt they had not made, or were not given the opportunity to make, these embedded relationships that might contribute to a reduced feeling of vulnerability. For many women across Myanmar, from diverse religious, ethnic and political backgrounds, the presence of soldiers in the highly militarised areas is a source of threat (WLB 2014). Therefore, even despite positive relationships within the school environment and with parents, female teachers may feel no more secure in their position. Teachers working across the different education sectors experience these insecurities differently. The much-publicised case of rape and murder of two Kachin community teachers in Northern Shan State in 2015 was referenced on several occasions by teachers and trainers interviewed, and held a particular resonance for community teachers and those trainers that frequently travelled to visit schools across the country. The attack may ultimately not have been a deliberate attack on teachers, but rather an opportune assault on women, however it underscores the particular risk that female teachers’ experience. With very low salaries, or in this case as volunteers, the teachers are often not able to access secure housing. Risks are also prevalent in travelling for teachers, trainers and students alike, particularly where the laying of landmines has been a common practice by multiple parties to the conflicts.

While teachers may experience violence, they can also be both complicit in and responsible for its reproduction. Although not addressed in policy texts, corporal punishment is still widely practiced, as reported by teachers and teacher educators:

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3 The rape and murder was alleged to have been carried out by soldiers stationed in the area, however the subsequent investigation failed to confirm this.
there are many cases I have witnessed with my own eyes ... you have to kneel; put your knees on floor and stand with your knees on the floor [for] thirty minutes. And also he put some kind of seeds [under the knees]. (int. 16)

Such practices were seen as reflecting and reinforcing a wider culture of violence, which frequently characterised hierarchical relationships. As one international education staff member highlighted, the challenge for training was reflected in “how to maintain this [training] in the classroom without the use of intimidation, fear or violence in their students, who are coming from homes where that’s still the way to control the children.” (int. 78). As is further explored in Chapter 10, teachers were also viewed by others as complicit, intentionally or otherwise, in the reproduction of dominant hierarchies that reinforce marginalisation through their failure to promote critical thinking skills and to deviate from curriculum texts (int. 110). Pedagogy, educational structures and exam systems can therefore support reproductions of violence through rewarding obedience, repetition and replication rather than negotiation, lateral thinking or mediation skills. Likewise, the teaching of history was particularly identified as problematic in reproducing discourses of dominance over minority groups, as is further explored below.

**Teachers’ Views of the History Curriculum and its Relation to Peacebuilding**

As also discussed in Chapter 8, the teaching of history in schools has been contentious and a particular grievance amongst ethnic minorities, which has exacerbated conflict and social divisions. While the case study in Chapter 8 focuses on the experiences and inequalities identified by ethnic Mon teachers within the MNEC schools, here we explore the perspectives of both MNEC and government school teachers on using current history curricula and their hopes for the revised curricula which are forthcoming.

Teachers in both government and ethnic school systems were aware of their obligation to work within prescribed history curricula whose content was partisan and could generate inter-ethnic animosity. One teacher in a Mon-ethnic MNEC school highlighted the division between a Mon and a Burmese centred history curriculum, pointing out that “our heroes are their enemies and our enemies are their heroes” (int. 61). Another recognised the exclusive concerns of the history curriculum taught in ethnic schools: “right now the MNEC curriculum is talking only about Mon” (int. 61). Such views reflect Metro’s findings that history textbooks used in government schools have been perceived to be “Burman centric” by ethnic minorities, while “ethnonationalist organisations that run schools aspire to teach children the history of their own ethnic group as opposed to the history of Burma as a whole” (Metro 2013, 150). Teachers in both systems also expressed their awareness of their limited pedagogic practices recognizing that they were generally teacher led: “the students have to follow what the teachers say and if they make any mistakes they lose marks” (int. 60). Such views indicate teacher’s awareness of their location as agents within a prescriptive curricula that reinforced division as well as functioned to deter students from critical questioning of a received body of information.

However, while mindful of working within such constraints, teachers also demonstrated faith in the possibilities of the subject to impact positively on the growth and behaviour of young people. History was perceived, both within MNEC schools and government schools, to be a subject that offered young people a body of role models of
ethical behaviours as well as situations from which they could learn and “imitate” (ints. 60, 61 and 93). From the subject young people could “take the good things as examples and avoid the bad things” (int. 93). For one government school teacher the subject offered “lessons from the past... in order not to become like this again in the future” (int. 60). Moreover, its potential for developing in young people “a love of the nation” (int. 60) was also underlined. The subject’s relevance also extended to its role in contributing to peacebuilding. Current curriculum reforms being overseen by the Mon National Ethnic Committee noted were motivated by an awareness of the importance of the subject to improve opportunities for peacebuilding (ints. 58 and 61). A particular concern was the glorification of violence within the current history curriculum for ethnic schools. As Metro has noted, one of the goals of the MNEC reforms of their history curriculum is to “encourage a spirit of unity with other ethnic groups and avoid perpetuating conflict” (Metro 2015, 5).

Recognising the subject’s potential to contribute to peacebuilding, some government school teachers critiqued the biases of curriculum content as undermining the subject’s potential to encourage views and attitudes that would ameliorate ethnic discrimination. Such critiques resulted in some teachers acknowledging their mediating role in rendering the content of the subject more acceptable to ethnic minority students. For example, a teacher in a government school expressed awareness of the potential of its Bamar dominated content to generate alienation amongst ethnic minority students. She drew attention to her commitment to presenting the subject in such a way as to de-emphasise its contribution to inter-ethnic animosity:

> We always discuss in the meeting about how can [we] teach it to be peaceful... and we tell them that all ethnic groups live in Myanmar country so that they must say we are all Myanmar citizens. (int. 60)

Moreover, other teachers explained how they glossed subjects that appeared to legitimate ethnic conflict such that “we consider to teach them as if it is not the ethnic war and it is just the war of the king to get the land” (int. 60). The ethnocentricity of the curricula taught within the ethnic system was also critiqued such that one informant noted that “if the history is biased people from different ethnic groups cannot have peace” (int. 58). Such examples illustrate how some teachers in Myanmar, even within a prescriptive curriculum, aim to “swim against the current”, as Metro has pointed out (Metro 2015, 12). These rather courageous teachers provide their students with an experience that runs counter to the ideological biases of prevailing curriculum orthodoxies.

A similar desire to offer students a different learning experience from that commonly used in history teaching was evident in teacher’s discussions of using creative pedagogical methods to stimulate interest and motivation. Aware that teacher led exposition might bore students, some teachers from both ethnic and government schools reflected on creative ways of communicating the subject including role plays, or making connections between the past and the present (ints. 59, 60 and 61). As one teacher from a rural township noted:

> For the history teaching we teach the lessons from the textbooks and we tell them what is happening now, so they can relate things. The teacher has to prepare more to do this. (int. 60)
When asked about their views on reforming the content of the curriculum, some teachers in both government and ethnic schools mentioned the inclusion of history post-Myanmar’s independence to enable the subject to be more relevant to students (ints. 60 and 93).

However, even while pointing to the role of the subject in breaking down ethnocentric prejudices, teachers also appeared to convey an attachment to exclusive and sectarian understandings of the subject. When invited to specify what the content of the history curriculum should be for their schools, some teachers within the ethnic system emphasised that its sole focus should be on the history and traditions of their Kings and their people (int. 59) within a narrative that stressed their unique suffering and sacrifice (ints. 42 and 59). Such views were underpinned by a perception of the subject as a vehicle of preservation of a distinctive ethnic cultural identity and its inter-generational transmission. As one teacher put it, “the purpose is not to lose their Mon identity and carry it on to the new generation” (int. 61). Here, teachers’ views resonate with attitudes current within the larger Mon ethnic community and local historians (McCormick 2014b). Their understanding of the purpose of the subject reflects that mission to “write a singular past” (McCormick 2014a, 300) which McCormick has explained is a result of a sense of “impending danger” that their “language, culture and history” is under threat (McCormick 2014a, 309). Aligning with such viewpoints on the function of history, teachers implicitly present themselves as guardians of their culture, responding to grassroots community expectations.

Opportunities for Promoting Peace and Social Justice

Listening to teacher’s perceptions and experiences underlines on the one hand the capacity of the curricula to frame their practices in such a way as to undermine their roles as agents of social cohesion. On the other hand, we heard evidence of teachers working against the ‘curricular grain’ and seeking to counter its potential to breed inter-ethnic animosity in the spaces of their classrooms and relationships with students. This confirms evidence cited by Metro (2015, 7) that even within a highly authoritarian and repressive educational system, in which students and teachers have been punished for using their creative thinking skills, in schools some are “using the system in a different way” (Metro 2015). However, such examples of the exercise of peacebuilding agency outside of curricula expectations also co-exist with teachers articulating highly exclusive and ethnocentric conceptions of the subject and its truths. Teacher agency, particularly in relation to history teaching as outlined above, is conditioned by community expectations of the role of certain subjects in the preservation of distinctive ethnic identities, compromising the prospect of using the classroom to promote inter-ethnic understanding. In seeking to mobilise history teaching for ethnocentric as well as more tolerant and pluralistic purposes linked explicitly to peacebuilding, these Myanmar teachers present what has been referred to as the “double-sided nature of their role” (Horner et al 2015, 40). Yet perhaps the most important message to emerge from our research is the relevance of engaging the teacher voice in order to build understanding of the complex impacts of curricula in driving, defining and compromising their agency as peacebuilders.

However, the possibilities for teachers to contribute to peacebuilding within and beyond their classrooms were not limited to those teaching history. As highlighted above, some teachers identified a role for themselves as builders of peace within their communities.
Perhaps unsurprisingly, this characterisation was more commonly identified by those working in communities more directly affected by conflict, including by Mon teachers working in the MNEC schools. One teacher for example indicated:

The teachers and head teachers see themselves as peace builders in the classroom and also in the community, because they are not only teaching but also help students with their behaviours. In the community teachers have to work with the parents on both children’s learning and behaviour. (int. 63)

As the quote above suggests, notions of building peace however were largely attributed to teaching interpersonal behaviour to students to avoid fighting in the classroom, while also acknowledging the need to address students’ wellbeing. Likewise, another MNEC teacher also reflected:

We can develop […] the spirit of working together, teach them to help them have a good standard of living and this will help them not to fight. (int. 59)

Equally, MNEC teachers were more likely to express this position than government or Yangon based teachers, pointing to differing priorities in the school systems. Emphasis amongst these teachers was placed on positive experiences in the classroom as building a peaceful environment: “In socializing and in their work and also in teaching if the teacher can teach the lesson with fun then that brings to peace” (int. 93).

Beyond the formal texts of the national policy reform, which make little reference to the opportunities within education to contribute to peacebuilding, some local and international organisations recognised this opportunity. The potential for teachers to play a greater role in mediating conflict was acknowledged by these (national) staff in training initiatives, stemming from their position within the community:

Because teachers are respected in community. When the teacher comes in and plays the role of sort of handling the conflict, playing the role of the connector or reconconnector, it’s acceptable. (int. 50)

Likewise, within organisations associated with the peace processes, there was also a recognition amongst staff members which was not reflected in political practice:

For the country to go ahead with the sustainable peacebuilding process, the teachers are very critical. They are the medium connecting, like improving the youths, for students to understand the country, to understand each other and the foundation of the country in every sector. So the teacher is very important, the teacher needs to understand contemporary issues and conflict issues and needs [to be] more proficient in their language, their subjects. (int. 13)

However the tension between this potential contribution of teachers to peacebuilding and the role that is expected of them by the state “to get through the curriculum and for the children to pass the exams” (int. 4), was clearly acknowledged by education staff:

Teachers have no time. They are busy with chapter end test which they are assigned and need to finish the chapters. They need to prepare their students for these tests. (int. 46)

In this, the current process of curriculum reforms potentially offers an opportunity to reformulate texts and timetables alike in such a way as to allow greater openings for peacebuilding practices to take place within the classrooms. These revisions are being rolled
out across the school years sequentially, beginning with the primary curricula and later moving on to middle and high school level. Consequently, as a final focus of this chapter, the curriculum reforms being supported by JICA at primary level are examined below, drawing on interviews with JICA and MoE representatives.

Curriculum reforms
Under JICA support, Myanmar’s primary level basic education curriculum is being reformed in a process which started in March 2014 and is due to complete in October 2019 (int. 84). The revised curriculum framework has only recently received approval from the minister. This project involves the development of a national curriculum framework, which integrates skills development into the coverage of all subjects. These include communication, problem solving, critical thinking, logical thinking, scientific processes, and innovation. The project also involves a major review of the content of subject textbooks to orient them away from their presentation of information for pupil memorization towards a more skills-based approach to subject learning, which is seen to encourage critical thinking and problem solving. Given the fact that textbooks in Myanmar have not been substantively revised for 30 years (int. 84), this is a particularly ambitious and potentially transformational – yet not unproblematic – undertaking.

Managers of the project are aware of its far-reaching implications for the potential transformation of teacher practices in Myanmar given the current dominance of rote learning and knowledge transmission in preparation for tests. As one informant working on the new content pointed out, “current textbooks are based on the teacher-centred approach. So, we are using a totally different approach” (int. 84) which encourages student enquiry and active learning. Thus, curricula and textbook reform are perceived as interconnected with reforms to teacher education as well as assessment systems. A key aim of the project is therefore to foster teachers who can deal with the new curriculum framework through reform of the curricula of teacher education colleges. To this end, in conjunction with textbook production, the project is also generating teacher guides. Moreover, another strand is to re-orient the current assessment system away from factual testing towards evaluating pupils’ acquisition of skills and understanding. Textbooks are foreseen to offer suggestions as to how this may be implemented.

The project is thus important in bringing teacher practices into relation with curricula and assessment systems. Within the context of Myanmar’s fractured education system, this is a particularly ambitious project. Institutional divisions within the ministry that have separated curricula development from teacher training have not facilitated such connectivity. However, this perception of the inter-relation between curricula reform and teacher education is embedding at ministerial level. In relation to the JICA reforms, an informant from the Department of Education Planning and Training (DEPT) pointed out that teacher education cannot be understood in isolation from curriculum reform (int. 75). This project has the potential to remove some of the systemic obstacles, which have undermined teacher’s ability to diversify their teaching practices. However, this would need to go hand in hand with changing teachers’ obligation to an assessment system that encourages rote learning for tests and to overcome a shortage of resources to support the implementation of new approaches to learning (Metro 2015).
The project’s managers are aware of the scale of the challenges of teacher implementation, given its radical departure from the patterns of teaching and learning that teachers in Myanmar are deploying. Indeed, one noted that: “if we totally shift dramatically, maybe the teacher cannot catch up” (int. 84). Such perceptions are particularly relevant and evince an awareness of what Metro has termed the “danger of over-ambitiousness” when aiming to implement innovative solutions (Metro 2015, 13). Indeed, project managers place a high priority on importance of developing appropriate approaches to teacher professional development. Thus, one commented that:

Once the curriculum is developed and the textbooks are changed, if the teacher doesn’t change, the new curriculum will not be realized. That’s why teacher training is very important. (int. 84)

Thus, project managers saw the goal of training to be equipping teachers to be able to develop a range of skills in pupils - communication, critical thinking, problem solving - through active and participatory learning, but nevertheless to balance this approach with attention to more familiar subject content. Project managers suggested that a blend in training of more traditional whole class approaches linked to the communication of subject content, together with supporting teachers to diversify their learning strategies, would be the most plausible way of securing teacher ownership of the curriculum reforms (int. 84). Such attempts to build on existing practice rather than aim for radical transformation echo the strategies being deployed in other teacher education reforms (discussed further in Chapter 7).

While not explicitly referring to peacebuilding - which informants pointed out was linked to their awareness of sensitivities within the Ministry at the time (int. 84) - various components of the content of the new curriculum relate to the inculcation of relevant values and behaviours. This was the case for subjects such as social studies and its inclusion of moral and civic education. Moral education addresses several themes including relation to self, to other people, to group and society and to nature and the universe, as well as particular values including appreciation and respect, rights and responsibility, integrity, good manners and culture and social cohesion. While not referring explicitly to drivers of conflict in Myanmar, their generic focus on pupil development of behaviours, knowledges and skills linked to interpersonal and societal communication and understanding overlaps with the broadly relational dimensions of peacebuilding processes at the local scale.

Specific components of envisaged content, including the reduction of references to the military in social studies, indicate a commitment to the opportunity to use the curricula to delegitimise violence. Given the legacy of control over the history curriculum and textbooks in Myanmar by the military state for the purposes of nation-building (Salem-Gervais & Metro 2012) if followed through, this is a radical departure. Violence is also addressed through the treatment of such topics as bullying in school. Moreover, the selection of 10 famous people in Myanmar to be studied within social studies aims at inclusivity by ensuring representation from different ethnic groups (int. 84). Including such peacebuilding related content, curriculum developers were aware both of the need to respect Ministry sensitivities while doing justice to their sense that curriculum reform should reflect national renewal and aspiration. In the words of one curriculum manager: “this is the new textbook and Myanmar will be a democratic country” (int. 84). Nonetheless, current plans for textbooks to be written
only in Burmese - as well as uncertainty about how the curriculum will use the freedom to include 20% local content - suggests the curriculum’s limitations in relation to addressing pressing issues of social justice linked to a lack of recognition of the diversity of cultures and representation of ethnic groups.

Conclusion
There has been a tendency to instrumentalise teachers as quick solutions to educational challenges, rather than to consider their particular identities, capacity and agency. Understanding the varying positions and framings of teachers within contemporary Myanmar, as well as learning from the practices and perspectives of teachers themselves, supports greater uncovering of their roles in conflict and in peacebuilding.

Traditionally teachers have been held in high esteem within Myanmar, which offers an opportunity for teachers to take on positive mediating and leadership roles within their communities. However, the status of the profession has been undermined by chronic underinvestment in the education sector, leading to teachers suffering material hardship, insecurity and often seeking work beyond their school environment. The low salaries that teachers receive have contributed to the feminization of the profession, however, despite the high numbers of women in the teaching workforce avenues for promotion and decision-making roles in the sector preference men. Several female teachers spoke of their feelings of insecurity in being deployed to remote and conflict-affected areas, which contributed to teachers dropping out of the profession or not being eligible for promotion. Gender considerations are therefore a significant dimension to any changes in the education structures.

While teachers saw a role for themselves in relation to building positive and peaceful inter-personal relationships with pupils and in the wider community, they frequently reported being exasperated by unrealistic expectations linked to an over-dense curriculum and additional responsibilities within and beyond the school. This contributed to a tension between the recognition of the potential peacebuilding agency of teachers and the instrumental, exam-oriented expectations of the state that require teachers to act as obedient civil servants. Through the examples encountered within the research, the strategies that some teachers employ to help advance notions of peacebuilding within their classrooms and their communities offer indications of the opportunities that may be expanded upon.

However multiple constraints continue to limit such opportunities, as evidenced in the accounts of history teaching in Mon State. Although teachers within government and ethnic systems were aware of the potential of history to contribute to peacebuilding, they were constrained by existing curricula frameworks. Additionally, for certain teachers, their own (community-driven) attachment to sectarian approaches to history, undermined their commitment to exploiting the subject’s potential to contribute to social cohesion. Current processes of curriculum revision should go some way to contributing to improved teacher practices in such areas, however the imperative remains for training to be carefully linked to its innovative focus.
References


