Chapter 7 – Navigating Teacher Education Reform: Priorities, Possibilities and Pitfalls

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Abstract
This chapter focuses on the challenges and possibilities of teacher education reforms, setting these against the backdrop of current developments in processes of teacher governance and accountability, and curriculum reform of basic education as well as broader political economy dynamics. A particular strength of the analysis is its rootedness in the views and perspectives of a range of stakeholders in Yangon and Mon State including teachers, teacher educators and state officials as well as concrete case studies of interventions and initiatives that highlight key issues. These include the challenges of teacher education reform; the diversity of approaches by local and international agencies; the different positioning of teachers within the formal and ethnic systems of education provision; the constraints and possibilities of addressing issues related to peacebuilding; and the dangers of an uncritical and decontextualized deployment of international models of teacher accountability and pedagogy.

Introduction
While focusing primarily on teacher education and reform initiatives affecting teachers, this chapter firstly locates these within the context of wider issues related to teacher governance and accountability. It highlights the legacy of centralised and authoritarian control over teachers’ work and discusses recent initiatives towards decentralising teacher governance to townships. It also spotlights continuing inequalities in the distribution of resources to schools in remote and marginalised areas, as well as between schools in the formal and parallel education systems – including the monastic sector and ethnic education systems; and the resulting challenges experienced by teachers deployed to these contexts. Secondly, it reflects on recent initiatives to enhance teacher accountability again highlighting context-specific challenges and possibilities.

The third section starts out by looking at macro level systemic issues related to teacher education. It clarifies the current avenues for training and professional development available to diverse constituencies of teachers in a complex and fractured landscape of provision. It then reviews current teacher education curricula, pinpoints areas requiring reform, while also highlighting the challenging cultural political economy context that shapes and constrains the possibilities for change. Indeed, since the writing of this paper, elections in November 2015 have given the National League for Democracy a majority of seats in Parliament. The findings

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reported in this chapter, like those of other contributions to this book, are based on data gathered prior to this change during the rule of the USDP government which is referenced throughout the text.

Attention to the curricula of teacher education is followed by more micro level analysis drawing from four case studies of teacher education initiatives developed by international and local actors. These highlight a diversity of entry points and approaches and provide insights for further reflections on how such interventions address the peacebuilding agency of teachers, as well as their strengths and weaknesses in relation to achieving coherence, sustainability and context-responsiveness. The fourth section discusses an ambitious project for curricula reform at primary level with important implications for reforming teaching practices.

The chapter draws on the voices and viewpoints of a range of actors - including teachers, teacher trainers, head teachers, international actors, education officials and community based stakeholders – in the Mon and Yangon areas of Myanmar. It also spotlights various dimensions of teacher education and its wider context including issues of governance and accountability, curricula content, as well as the cultural political economy factors (as introduced as an analytical framing in Chapter 2) conditioning and constraining reform. Bringing these various lenses and perspectives together, along with concrete references to current and ongoing interventions that illuminate key issues, it reveals the complexity, challenges and possibilities of teacher education reform in contemporary Myanmar.

A Note on Methodology: Talking to Teachers in Myanmar
The research consortium spoke to 115 teacher related respondents including head teachers, teachers and teacher trainers between January and April 2015. Local researchers conducted all interviews in Burmese and, where necessary, in Mon language. They were aware of the reticence of teachers to discuss their work and feelings and the consequent challenge of engaging teachers in a dialogue. This may be understood as a product of teachers’ experience of a centralised and authoritarian management structure, discussed below, which does not encourage teachers to express individual viewpoints.

Teacher Governance and the Legacy of Centralisation
In Myanmar, the historical legacy of a strongly centralised and authoritarian system of governance and control has and to a great extent still impacts on the way teachers and teacher educators are managed. This is especially true of the country’s formal education system of teacher recruitment, deployment, and training (detailed below), while in contrast the parallel education systems - including the Monastic sector and the ethnic education systems - seem to be more responsive to locally defined demands of communities. Some of the teacher educator interviewees expressed how the centrally controlled system by the national government undermines the ability to effectively meet the needs of a wide diversity of local communities, while at the same time paying little attention to the needs and priorities of its teacher educator force. One informant pointed out that teacher educators were moved around the country in militaristic fashion “like an army” (int. 102).

With current (still minimal) shifts to more decentralised forms of governance, data from Mon state suggests that township education officers felt somewhat more ownership
over the monitoring aspects of teacher’s work, feeding in to slowly changing forms of accountability. UNICEFs Township Education Improvement Plan is directly intending to support this shift, through building the capacity of township education officials in Mon state. As mentioned by one township education official, “now we are supporting the facilities for the children to have equality in education for all the children including the ethnic people and the Mon national schools” (int. 39). Nevertheless, some officers mentioned feeling rather constrained within existing centrally controlled forms of decision-making on other aspects of teacher governance (recruitment, deployment and remuneration), as it is yet unclear what authorities they can exercise with regards to teacher accountability. Furthermore, our data suggests there may be a possibility of the misuse of newly gained decision-making power by township education officers to be driven by personal whim, rather than strategic decision-making that supports inclusive collective needs.

**The Deployment of Resources and Teachers: Challenges and Inequities**

A related issue with regard to teacher governance, which is the perceived imbalance in the distribution of educational resources between teachers working in the state and ethnic and/or monastic systems. As further illustrated in the case studies in Chapter 8, our data shows how those educators in remote areas or otherwise marginalised positions (being part of a non-government school system) felt undermined by a lack of resources (textbooks, classroom furniture), as well as human resource matters (training, enough teacher staff etc.) (ints. 15 and 110). One informant from the monastic sector highlighted the inability of principals to meet the needs of large numbers of rural children who wish to pursue their education beyond primary level. Because of the lack of investment in middle level schools these students tend to drop out (int.15). A recent report (WCRP & HURFOM, 2015) on education provision in Mon rural communities confirms the low resource constraints, teacher shortages, and poor school infrastructure in village schools.

Reinforcing the findings outlined in Chapter 6, our data also confirmed a gendered impact in terms of deployment. As many teachers are single women those interviewed attributed this position to their not wanting to take up teaching posts in conflict-affected or remote areas where they felt isolated, far removed from their families and without structures of social support (ints. 122 and 123). Others also identified this as a cause of the lack of promotion for female teachers to positions of administrative authority as they were disadvantaged compared to male colleagues who received benefits from having spent time in ‘difficult’ schools, in conflict-affected and remote areas (int. 123).

In relation to the deployment mechanisms, teachers and teacher educators interviewed largely felt unprepared and unsupported to meet the challenges of being deployed by central level government in any place around the country. Firstly, it was expressed how in remote areas teachers may be expected to teach various subjects and at different levels; something for which they often are not trained. A teacher trainer pointed out that:

> There are some challenges for some new teachers. In some cases, if it is remote areas or faraway places, there aren’t enough teachers, so they have to teach 3-4 subjects. So, if you are specializing here in biology, maybe you might have to teach history or geography if there is lack of teachers. So that is challenge. And also, you are preparing
as a senior assistant teacher but there are no teachers at the junior secondary school classes, so you have to teach the subjects that you are not familiar with. That is another challenge. Sometimes as a new teacher, you have to listen and follow what the principal said or the dean said. (int. 21)

This situation of clashing expectations between the head teacher and incoming teachers was perceived to lead to frustration and tensions at the school level. Also identified as problematic in this regard was the lack of support available to teachers once they were deployed:

Another thing is teachers are, once they are trained, they are sent to school and there is no follow up support system. So, in the remote area, teachers cannot get technical support, any kind of support, you see. And they need it in their work. So, there is no follow up technical support. (int. 16)

Secondly, in addition to a lack of professional preparedness, the material hardships faced by teachers deployed in remote areas, and the insufficient salaries, undermined their wellbeing and job motivation. These include a lack of appropriate and affordable housing for teachers, difficult or unavailable transport, and a lack of safety (especially for female teachers).

In the absence of incentives, these precarious conditions lead teachers in remote areas to experience decreasing levels of job motivation and eventually to leave their job. Reflecting on her reasons for deciding against continuing to work in a remote area, one informant reported “transportation problems and lack of safety” as well as “the practices of the principals and education officers which they found unbearable or unacceptable” (int.122). Moreover, a recent report on the policy of hiring daily wage teachers points out that it “will not resolve the disparity in educational conditions.... A strong system of incentives to remote schools should be introduced and a periodic transfer system among all teachers should be considered” (Muta 2015, 2). The demoralising combination of harsh material conditions, challenging relationships with school leaders, lack of affordable accommodation, unrealistic expectations in relation to teaching roles and subjects and inadequate training all undermine the well-being and effectiveness of teachers deployed to rural areas. Finally, at the moment teacher educators felt that there was no adequate training for teachers to be sent to conflict-affected areas, which will be further discussed below.

Teacher Accountability: New Developments and Ongoing Challenges

Against a shifting landscape of centralization and some preliminary decentralization shifts, the government, supported by UNICEF and other international donors, has been driving first steps towards a new system of teacher accountability. This new system referred to as the “competency framework” is not necessarily unique to Myanmar, and according to CESR documentation draws on teacher management reforms implemented in “Western” contexts, albeit not uncontested. The competency framework aims to enhance accountability through identifying competencies for various educators - including teachers at different levels, teacher educators as well as management staff - through a participatory process of consultation. They are also seen to provide codes of conduct for these various educators at different scales. These jointly agreed compilations of competencies then are foreseen to be used to hold those different educational stakeholders accountable for their work. Reflecting further on the potential pitfalls below, the national government and international actors see the benefits of this framework in that it can provide a shared language of expectations, potentially to
encourage dialogue and understanding between the various educational professionals (e.g. teachers, head teachers, teacher educators and township education officers). The peacebuilding potential is then perceived to result from the enhancement of clarity over tasks and responsibilities between those professionals, which can increase collaboration and mutual understanding, a finding which is also supported in the literature (Horner et al. 2015). Referring to this process, one education specialist pointed out that:

If we could take those competencies and post them on a wall, and as the community could better understand what could be expected of the head teacher and the education officer, they would be able to help each other and critique each other and encourage each other towards a more shared language and goal. (int. 89)

Our data on this topic speaks specifically to the way initial steps have been taken in Mon state, and recognising the unique nature of Mon with regards to other parts of the country. Reflecting on the data, and supported by literature on the topic of teacher accountability (Robertson 2012), there is a danger that the generic nature of competency frameworks and a looming lack of context- and conflict-specificity is largely unresponsive to the needs of Myanmar’s diverse regions. Firstly, drawing unproblematically on international best practices might not be the ideal solution in a conflict-affected situation, where numerous educators are operating in non-state and other parallel systems. There are other systems of teacher accountability operating in the country, such as community-based systems of teacher support and control, which are largely ignored and marginalised. Here, accountability is more framed at local levels around the appropriateness of the background of the teacher (e.g. ethnicity, language, gender, age, commitment to the locality, and the importance of local knowledges). Secondly, given the fractured nature of the education system, a generic competency framework developed at the central (majority-dominated) level potentially exacerbates tensions and feelings of being ignored and excluded. Thirdly, then, the internationally driven, neoliberal-inspired efficiency agenda that drives such a framework to shift responsibility to local levels and individual teachers (Robertson 2012), has the potentially negative effect of continuing or reviving authoritarian/coercive systems of control over teachers, rather than providing much needed support in difficult working conditions. Finally, these competencies are often developed with an image that is much more favourable than the actual under-resourced school reality most Myanmar teachers face.

Teacher Training and Education
Having highlighted key issues relating to the governance, accountability and deployment of teachers, the following section now addresses their training and education. It first offers an overview of the diverse pathways available. This is followed by an analysis of curricula content, the politics of teacher education reform and a review of a selection of interventions, community based and international, which aim to enhance current provision.

Teacher Training and Professional Development Routes in Myanmar
The process of teacher recruitment, training and promotion in the state sector remains severely flawed at present. As highlighted above, this recruitment and promotion process has led to a concentration of inexperienced and unqualified teachers in primary education, and exacerbated concerns about the quality and relevance of education—a matter that then continues to fuel drop outs from the system (UNICEF 2012). Additionally, teacher training
institutions struggle with challenges including: inadequate skills in pedagogical teaching; poor facilities, equipment, and information resources; overcrowded curricula; and lack of supervision. Moreover, school leaders are not equipped to be instructional leaders, and are instead promoted based on years of service and qualification. Little training is offered to these leaders once they enter into the job (UNICEF 2012).

However, across the different sectors, the opportunities for teacher professional development vary considerably. Figure 7.1 below provides an overview of pre-service and in-service training for state, monastic, ethnic and community schools.

**Figure 7.1 Education sectors and teacher training**

As depicted in the figure above, formal pre-service teacher training prepares teachers to enter the government system through two Institutes/Universities of Education, located in Yangon and Sagaing. These deliver a four year B.Ed course, recently increased to five years, that qualifies teachers to teach at secondary and upper secondary levels. The 22 Education Colleges located throughout the country offer two-year courses, which prepare teachers to teach at primary and lower-secondary levels respectively. Once in service, there is some (although limited) opportunity for state teachers to up-grade their skills. Additionally, the recent introduction of daily-wage teachers through the ‘Quick Win’ platform enables junior teachers to be deployed in schools as assistants after one month of training. In contrast, the non-state education sectors have no formalised pre-service training. Here, teachers are recruited directly from the community, often beginning on a voluntary basis. Once in service however, monastic, ethnic and community sector teachers may have greater access to professional development through teacher training initiatives supported by international and

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2 design by Elizabeth Maber
local NGOs. International actors (with the exception of UNICEF and one JICA supported initiative) were not allowed to implement training programmes in the government education system prior to 2011, and consequently organisations such as Save the Children and the British Council worked exclusively with the non-state sectors. The result is that although non-state teachers may have few or no formally recognised pre-service qualifications, where trainings were available and accessible, some have been trained in more learner-centred pedagogies. Since 2011, the education reform process has enabled international actors to work with the state, resulting in partnerships, which include UNICEF SITE and head teacher training and the British Council and VSO supported EfECT (discussed below). Finally, opportunities for contact and shared learning across the sectors are also beginning to open up. The Yaung Zin teacher training programme, developed and implemented within the monastic sector is an example, again outlined below, which may be adopted more widely across the state sector in future.

**Current Teacher Education Provision and Potential for Reform**

As noted by Hardman, there has been a “growing recognition by the Government of Myanmar and its donor partners that a focus on pedagogy and its training implications need to be at the heart of the commitment to improve student retention, progression, and learning in Myanmar” (Hardman 2012, 3). Driven by such considerations, teacher education reform has emerged as a particular national priority (Hardman 2012, vi). Reports on the analysis of current provision (Hardman et al. 2013; 2014; MoE 2014) contain recommendations on the reform of curricula and pedagogical practices in training institutions, as well as offering suggestions to systematise teacher professional development linking pre-service and in-service training. They also pinpoint a range of areas of teacher education that require urgent reform, including:

- The commitment of teacher educators to a transmission model of teaching;
- An overcrowded curriculum with little opportunity for private study and reflection, but rather focused on an end-of-unit assessment system;
- Challenging physical environments in which teachers work, especially in remote areas;
- Weak partnerships between teacher training institutions and the schools in which students do their teaching practicum;
- Lack of professional development opportunities for teacher educators to enhance their “knowledge, understanding and practice of effective pedagogy” (Hardman 2012, vi) as well as to develop mentoring and coaching skills;
- Limited attention to practical challenges faced by teachers including multi-grade teaching, the teaching of languages other than Burmese and inclusive education (Hardman et al. 2013, 31).

Lall’s study of the promotion of child-centred approaches in teacher training offered by international aid organisations has drawn attention to the considerable cultural and logistical challenges that undermine its effective implementation by teachers: “NGOs and INGOs who are importing western educational practices to other countries... should adapt models to local contexts before implementation” (Lall 2011, 231; see also Lall et al. 2013). Other reports similarly caution against “the simplistic polarisation of pedagogy into teacher-centred and child-centred” so that “there is a better balance and blending of local cultural practices in the
different regions of Myanmar with internationally informed teacher education reforms” (Hardman et al. 2016, 116). Such insights underline the need for training interventions to be carefully tailored to the lived experiences of teachers and the cultural and contextual factors conditioning their work in Myanmar.

**Navigating Teacher Education Reform in a highly politicised context**

Our informants drew attention to institutional as well as a range of cultural political economy factors, which rendered such interventions to reform and enhance teacher education difficult to navigate. One was the current division within the ministry of education, which split teacher training from school curriculum development, with the former being overseen by the Department for Teacher Education and Training (DTET) and the latter by the Department of Basic Education. As one informant from DEPT put it,

> you cannot look at teacher education alone, you have to look at curriculum reforms as well... so I think the Ministry has to co-ordinate among these different agencies who are involved in teacher education. (int. 75)

Current restructuring within the Ministry with the possibility of establishing a “teacher education department” (int. 75) may facilitate such co-ordination. Moreover, constraints of access to teacher education colleges and schools as well as obligations of international aid agencies to work closely within the parameters set by the Ministry have narrowed their field of manoeuvre (int. 4). One informant suggested that this had entailed challenges in reaching out to non-state educational actors including teachers in ethnic and monastic systems, but nevertheless progress had been made on ensuring trainings were as inclusive as possible (ints. 48 and 131). Another issue was the sometimes-controversial nature of aspirations to reform the content of teacher education, in particular in relation to building conflict sensitivity into the curriculum. The view was expressed that a cautious approach, which stressed the continuity of such subject content with traditional curriculum priorities, had been an essential prerequisite for ensuring its acceptance within the Ministry of Education (ints. 48 and 74). One informant noted that “it was too sensitive politically to work with teachers for peace elements... so we had to go step by step” (int. 48).

Pointing to the challenges of navigating teacher education initiatives within the current policymaking environment in Myanmar, another informant from an international aid agency observed that “it’s not going to be an easy thing to do in a very complex environment and when there’s a lot of rhetoric which can be destructive” (int. 4). Together, then, these viewpoints are a reminder that teacher education initiatives are interacting with a highly politicised and challenging context that influences what is realistic and feasible.

**Case Studies of Teacher Education Initiatives**

Nevertheless, operating within such constraints, there has been a recent proliferation of teacher education interventions within the country. The data for the following analysis of a selected number of teacher education interventions is drawn from a range of stakeholders, enabling a combination of insights from programme managers in aid agencies, teachers who have experienced trainings as well as the perspectives of government officials. This selection combines in-service and pre-service trainings as well as long-term projects. It includes trainings addressed nationwide to non-state teachers in the monastic system, as well as
initiatives targeting head teachers and teachers in government and ethnic community schools in Mon state. The research team did not find evidence of evaluations of the impact of these initiatives. However, the following comments are not intended to be evaluative but rather to offer reflections on their strategies to develop the capacity of teachers and where relevant to clarify their contribution and potential to supporting their peacebuilding agency. Together they illustrate the creativity and diversity of approaches to the challenge of enhancing teacher education provision in contemporary Myanmar.

**Site Training UNICEF**

UNICEF’s SITE programme (School based in service Teacher Education) training is offered to in–service primary teachers in Mon State including those working in government, monastic, and ethnic managed schools. It was piloted in 2011 and started in 2012.

The SITE training offered by UNICEF to in-service primary teachers in Mon State uses self-study distance learning modules in which teachers draw on their classroom experiences and collaborate with other teachers and their head teachers within inter-school clusters (UNICEF, SITE Programme Guidelines 2014). Its primary focus is on the development of teacher pedagogical skills through ten study units. These include materials on child friendly schools, reflective teaching practices, lesson planning, learning through interaction and collaboration, developing students’ basic skills, and assessment of learning. The programme is intended to ground professional development strategies in the daily realities of classroom life experienced by teachers as well as through structured self-assessment of their practice. Experienced teachers are encouraged to work with less experienced colleagues to develop practical teaching skills with an important mentoring and support role envisaged for the head teacher (ints. 5, 7 and 46). This approach resonates with recent international thinking on effective ways of building and changing teacher’s practices which emphasise both the formative impact of developing “learning communities at the school and cluster level” (Hardman 2012, 7; see Horner et al. 2015, 50). It also responds to a perceived need for teachers to develop their practice through joint, ongoing reflection about the pedagogical processes they choose to use.

This site-specific, teacher-driven, and collaborative model of professional learning was underlined as a key rationale of SITE’s approach. Moreover, it was recognised as a departure from previous training modalities within Myanmar. As one education officer put it: “this is an attempt to move teacher education from workshop methodology to self-learning on the job training... coaching, mentoring, group discussions, journal writing...” (int. 5). One informant drew attention to the innovative nature of SITE’s grassroots rather than “top down” approach to teacher development, given the authoritarian structures of control during previous regimes. It was pointed out that the model of teacher learning envisaged was “nothing unusual in many countries around the world but for Myanmar, this is quite revolutionary” (int. 5). Such comments are a reminder of the challenging cultural contexts within which more participatory approaches to teacher education are aiming to take root.
THE BRITISH COUNCIL English for Education College Trainers (EfECT) Programme for Teacher Educators

The British Council’s EfECT (English for Education College Trainers) started in 2013 and was initiated as a result of discussions between then President Thien Sein and then UK Prime Minister, David Cameron.

This intervention is notable for offering context-specific and culturally responsive support to enhance the agency of a professional group, teacher educators, whose capacity development and needs are often overlooked within conflict-affected contexts (Hardman 2012, 20). This inattention serves to “minimise the effectiveness of their contribution to the education of teachers at the PRESET and INSET stages” (Hardman 2012, 20). Addressing this challenge, The British Council EfECT programme provides English and pedagogical training for teacher educators over a period of 2 years. It works in 20 education colleges, 2 Institutes of Education, the National Centre for English Language, and the University for the Development of National Races. The programme has supported around 1575 teacher educator beneficiaries. The first year of the project aimed to help improve English proficiency in the context of the expectation that academic subjects are taught to trainees through the medium of English. Its attention to developing educator’s pedagogical practices addresses concerns about the dominance of whole-class non-interactive teaching methods within training colleges as noted above. However, the programme’s aim of avoiding imposing western pedagogic frameworks of best practice is well aligned with the emphasis in recent international research on the need for context-responsive and culturally sensitive teacher education (Lewin et al. 2003). The programme takes an emphatically practical rather than theoretical approach to the development of educator’s pedagogical skills.

Internal qualitative evaluations of the EfECT programme, which elicited the most ‘significant change’ as a result of participation, have underlined the increased self-esteem and professional confidence enjoyed by teacher educators. Moreover, informants highlighted the appeal of learning an international language, which had symbolic as well as practical relevance because it represented the possibility of extending their communicative possibilities as well as their intellectual horizons. This is an important acknowledgement, given the widely recognised low morale of this professional group and their difficulty accessing international developments in education (Hardman 2012, 21). While EfECT is an intervention targeted at in-service professionals, it is also intended to benefit pre-service students who will benefit from the enhanced professional skills of their teachers. In its careful tailoring to cultural context and particular professional needs, the programme illustrates a distinctive approach to enhancing the agency of a key but neglected professional group.

UNICEF’s Head Teacher Training

Another group whose needs are frequently neglected are school leaders, whom UNICEF’s Head Teacher Training engages with. This training is currently offered in 34 townships to 5000 head teachers. Through providing training in management and instructional leadership, the programme affirms their pivotal role as agents of change and key figures not only in their schools but also in the wider community. Course content contains management tools including school self-assessment and planning, staff development as well as how to build community links (ints. 6, 7 and 48). This is delivered to heads through a cascade model of
training with master trainers from the DEPT. In relation to the recognised need within CESR evidence gathering (Hardman 2012), to establish systemic professional networks or “clusters,” the training’s focus on the pedagogical agency of the head teacher as an “instructional leader” is particularly important (ints. 5 and 48). In these clusters, teacher educators, school leaders, as well as township education officers are brought together to support classroom teachers in developing their pedagogical practice. Empowering school leaders in this particular aspect of their role is an important aspect of the intervention, understood to address a neglected feature of their leadership responsibilities at present (ints. 5, 36 and 48). Explaining the project’s rationale, one informant pointed out that:

We’ve noticed very much that they needed to be empowered with the sense that they are a leader of teaching and learning, that they can create an environment, that they can rally teachers to talk about teaching and learning, to coach and mentor each other.
(int. 36)

Head teachers recognised the impact of the training on their skills:

By attending head teacher training... compared with before I improved my management skills and developed better relationships with teachers and [learned] how to teach systematically. (int. 60)

They also mentioned their acquisition of administration skills to enable them to monitor and record school attendance and write development/improvement plans (ints. 63 and 74). Acknowledging the scarcity or absence of resources to support their day-to-day professional practice, head teachers placed particular value on the course materials. These were perceived as useful sources of practical advice to refer to on a daily basis: “I always put the book on the table – how to manage and monitor the school and teachers – all the questions are in that book” (int. 60).

Envisaging teacher professional development as a collaborative endeavour that mobilises the support of other teachers, head teachers as well as township education officials and educational administrators, the Head teacher as well as SITE trainings respond to Metro’s call for a systemic approach that goes beyond individual teachers working on their own (Metro 2015). Such approaches are more likely to yield that critical mass necessary to supporting individual teachers to develop their practices (Metro 2015).

**Yaung Zin Teacher Training Programme**
The Monastic Education Development Group’s Yaung Zin competency based trainings are offered to unqualified primary teachers in 256 schools nationwide within the monastic and other community based systems.

The Yaung Zin Teacher Training programme developed by local and international agencies uses a competency-based approach to teacher professional development. The course consists of eight modules which focus on: leaning needs and learning styles; teaching and learning strategies; lesson planning; classroom management; assessment; professional development; being a reflective practitioner; and working with parents and community (Yaung Zin n.d.(a), 3). These are covered in 31 days of full time training. Its competency based approach resonates with an agenda emerging from CESR to re-frame teacher professional development around a national teacher competency framework (Hardman 2012, vii; MoE 2014, 30). The value of this strategy as a vehicle for changing teacher behaviours and practice
is explained in the programme literature which notes the usefulness of competencies in “identifying clearly what a professional teacher needs to know and be able to do in the classroom, recognising the importance of context, and taking account of the human resources available” (Yaung Zin n.d.(a), 7).

However, in specifying the importance of context and resource constraints as conditioning the exercise of competencies, the Yaung Zin programme avoids the potentially generic and decontextualized processes of teacher accountability that competency frameworks can sometimes lead to. Indeed, a significant feature is its affirmation of the community role of the teacher (Yaung Zin n.d.(a)). The programme’s inclusion of a module on Working with Parents and the Community which is “based on a real case study of a community and its monastic school” (Yaung Zin n.d.(a), 6) illustrates this links with the community specific context in which teachers work.

Like other interventions and responding to national concerns as outlined above, the priority of the Yaung Zin programme is “teaching and facilitating learning” (Yaung Zin n.d.(a), 4). A key feature of its approach is the use of school based mentoring to follow up the initial training (int. 15). This enables “discussion on their difficulties in their practical teaching” (int. 15) reflecting a concern to link teacher development with the classroom realities they face on a daily basis. The training also adopts a systemic approach in which enhancing the agency of the teacher is one component of a broader strategy to build the capacity of other stakeholders including head teachers, parents, and wider community (int. 15). This is significant in understanding teacher’s development of their practice as a process, which is crucially influenced and potentially supported by a range of actors, in particular their head teachers. Similar to UNICEFs head teacher training, Yaung Zin’s attention to this professional group is based on the view that they are key agents of change in schools. As one informant put it “to change the education system in the monastic school, the principal is the very important leader... their visions and mindsets are very important” (int. 15). Moreover, their role in the wider community is also recognised such that “the majority of the monastic school principals are the leaders in their community” (int. 15).

Situating teacher education within its community context and approaching teacher development through competency acquisition supported by on site, classroom based mentoring, the Yaung Zin programme resonates with many of the recommendations for teacher education reform which have featured in CESR discussions.

Teacher Education and Peacebuilding; Some Reflections

A notable feature of all the teacher education interventions reviewed is their frequently implicit and indirect approaches to enhancing the peacebuilding roles of teachers. These possibilities were uncovered by researchers when engaging with teachers who were reflecting on the impact of training on their daily professional realities. Thus, while not explicitly referred to as peacebuilding, the development of pedagogical and managerial skills through the trainings was understood by teachers and head teachers to be relevant to the micro-realities of their roles and responsibilities to establish peaceful relationships in their schools and with their local communities. So, for instance, the focus on school development planning within head teacher training was perceived by trainees as potentially a strategic
vehicle through which they could make decisions on infrastructure or resourcing priorities, linked to the reduction of conflict and tensions (int. 63).

For example, head teachers pointed out how planning to improve school infrastructure through the erection of wall partitions would help to reduce tensions between teachers and students, arising from high noise levels and the likeliness of quarrels between groups of students being taught in one large open space (ints. 59 and 63). The opportunity to build school-community relationships through school improvement planning procedures was perceived to be conducive to peacebuilding processes:

If we get teaching resources from the school improvement plan we will be able to work together with the parent teacher association – together we can build up peace.
(int. 63)

In a similar way, teachers on the SITE training identified aspects of course content – in particular, the emphasis on child-friendly approaches, avoiding discrimination, creating a safe environment, avoiding corporal punishment, using problem-solving techniques such as discussion, giving students a chance to talk freely, referring pupils misbehaviour to the school council - as all supportive of their roles as peacebuilders, especially as this was construed in terms of building positive relationships with children and communities (ints. 59, 63 and 64). The relevance of trainings to the interpersonal and relational dimensions of their peacebuilding roles - with other teachers, students, and parents - were particularly underlined by teachers (ints. 60 and 63). The centrality of interpersonal relationship building within a community context to these teacher’s perceptions of their peace-related role aligns with the findings of Horner et al.’s review on teacher agency (2015). This found that:

[T]he way teachers teach is as important as what they teach in facilitating the knowledge, skills and attitudes that facilitate or obscure peaceful futures. Teachers are part of both the school community and the wider community where the school is situated. (Horner et al. 2015, 9)

Teachers recognised that the knowledges and skills acquired from trainings, while not explicitly tied to a peacebuilding agenda within the course content, could nevertheless support their participation in such social processes. Such reflections on the relevance of their training highlights the importance of the creative, perhaps unexpected ways in which teachers mediate and apply its content to extend their agency as peacebuilders within their particular school contexts.

Key stakeholders acknowledged the implicit and latent integration of peacebuilding dimensions of teacher’s practices within trainings, with particular emphasis on the peacebuilding potential of child-centred pedagogical approaches. A government official pointed out with regard to the SITE trainings that “it is not explicitly stated as such, but there are some ideas and principles already provided through different modules” (int. 75). Indeed, all the trainings reviewed included implicit or more direct content bearing upon the peacebuilding roles of the teacher. Thus, within the Classroom Management module of the Yaung Zing programme, one of the identified competencies is that the teacher should “demonstrate mutual respect, applying equity principles and lack of bias in dealing with student diversity, gender, race, ethnicity and religion” (Yaung Zin n.d.(a), 2). As one of the indicators of such inclusive teacher practice, the module draws attention to the importance
of recognising the cultural and ethnic diversity of Myanmar. In the specification of teacher competencies currently being developed within the MOE, teachers are expected to be “context sensitive, avoid discrimination and create an environment that promotes respect for diversity and social cohesion” (UNICEF n.d.). One education specialist thus pointed out that peacebuilding was infused throughout the competencies especially all those “related to communication” (int. 46).

This mode of infusing, rather than explicitly referring to, a peace or conflict-related dimension within teacher education may be understood as a strategic response to the potentially controversial and contested nature of the notion of peacebuilding within Myanmar’s government as discussed above (int. 48). Moreover, within the mandates of aid agencies, the explicitly peacebuilding implications of education interventions may be subservient to the privileging of the restoration of service delivery provision. As pointed out by one informant from an aid agency, “we are not so much trying to say that we do this for peacebuilding…. we’re doing that for the children’s education system... so that they can live peacefully” (int. 74). Such perceptions from practitioners underscore the challenges of embedding an explicit peacebuilding logic into teacher education, given other context-specific pressures on policy and programming.

However, some interventions did explicitly engage with the peacebuilding agency of teachers. For instance, the addition of Conflict Sensitivity to UNICEF’s Head teacher training addresses issues of conflict resolution. This emerged out of a recognition within aid agencies and amongst recipients of initial training for head teachers that handling conflict and building peaceful relationships between students, staff and the wider community was a key aspect of the school leader’s role (int. 48). As one education specialist put it, the aims of such trainings were “how to create a peaceful working environment in his or her school” (int. 48). Indeed, in identifying conflicts over practical community issues like digging a well for water or building a fence to keep a buffalo out – where the “role of the head teacher is very important” (int. 48) – these head teacher informants underscored their responsibilities as key community actors. Trainings were perceived to provide school leaders with basic concepts and strategies of conflict resolution which they would then adapt in relation to their contexts: “we provide the basic concepts because each area has a different scenario – some suffer with fighting government and armed groups” (int. 48).

Starting out, by contrast with a particular scenario of likely conflict for a teacher in the monastic system, the Yaung Zin programme includes a module to discuss “ways to manage conflicts relating to traditional beliefs and cultural norms concerning Monks” (Yaung Zin n.d.(b), 12). Here the teachers’ ability to develop skills to navigate relationships within rural communities, in which monks are socially powerful actors, is stressed as an aspect of conflict resolution. Thus, the module states that, “it is important for teachers to know how to get the support of key decision makers to facilitate working effectively with parents and community” (Yaung Zin n.d.(b), 12). Both these initiatives illustrate the essentially relational understanding of teacher peacebuilding agency, in which training was perceived to empower them to solve inter-personal conflicts (ints. 48 and 75).
In relation to broader peacebuilding dynamics, the opportunities which trainings offer for bridge-building between government and non-state teachers across former professional divides was perceived as an important benefit by both groups (ints. 59, 60 and 63). For instance, teachers and head teachers from government and ethnic schools’ systems participating in the SITE and Head teacher trainings recognised that the trainings had given them opportunities to build trust, share resources and discover common ground in their professional challenges and concerns. They were perceived by many as a chance to overcome the legacy of earlier divisions (ints. 58 and 60). Reflecting on the benefits of the head teacher training, one head noted that “we share and discuss on how to teach lessons and how to discipline students” (int. 58). Another noted that “we have to work with other head teachers so we see that it is effective. Each area is different from the other so we share our knowledge” (int. 58). Some sense of the role of trainings as spaces for trust building is evoked in the comment of one MNEC teacher who observed:

At first government teachers looked down on us as we were not fluent in Burmese, so [we] could not participate in the training sessions, but then after a time the government teachers also tried to understand [us] speaking in Mon language. (int. 59)

For one ethnic teacher, the trainings were an opportunity to challenge what was perceived as an unfair belittling by government teachers of students and teachers within the ethnic education system (int. 63).

However, teachers working within the ethnic education system also drew attention to the challenges of attending trainings, given their awareness of the disparity of resources between government and ethnic run schools (ints. 58 and 63) and the resulting differential capacity to implement what was learned. Thus, one head teacher working in the ethnic system pointed out that “for the government school teachers they are permanent, but our teachers turn over every year - we need to work with new teachers so we have difficulty” (int. 63). Ethnic teachers also drew attention to the linguistic challenges they encountered in trainings where the medium of instruction was Burmese: “our teachers are not fluent in Burmese so they think we do not have capacity but Burmese is not our language” (int. 41).

Such comments are a reminder that while providing new spaces for professional and social collaboration - and thereby contributing to broader peacebuilding dynamics - the training of teachers take place within a political economy environment in which legacies of educational inequity and lack of cultural recognition persist. Paradoxically, these may be reproduced in trainings.

**Implementing Teacher Education Reform: Challenges and Constraints**

The programmes reviewed are all relatively recent in origin and implementation. However, it may be opportune at this point to reflect on various broader issues which they raise linked to the overall logic and sustainability of teacher education initiatives in Myanmar. In so doing, it is illuminating to apply the theoretical framings of the 4Rs used throughout this book to understand how teacher education in particular may or may not contribute to broader processes of social justice.

Firstly, their very diversity of approaches and priorities, while a strength at one level, may also reveal a lack of co-ordination between aid agencies to ensure coherence and
complementarity within a long-term strategic vision. Taking an overview of current initiatives, one informant expressed the view that there was a lack of coherence in the response to key informative baselines studies such as that of Hardman (2012) (int. 8). Some informants from aid agencies did acknowledge their tendency to work without sufficient reference to each other and indeed sometimes in competition (int. 5). The result is that perhaps while each individual intervention has many strengths, the proliferation of initiatives directed to the improvement of teacher development lacks a collective rationale that might be gained from greater co-operation.

Secondly, and linked to the absence of coherence, are the difficulties of long-term planning for sustainable impact as a result of the short-term priorities of donor funding (int. 74). Given the needs for teachers to develop their practice over time, with proper support systems and follow up to trainings, this is a major structural weakness of initiatives which are mostly short term and therefore ineffectual in promoting sustainable changes. Our data revealed considerable frustrations amongst some programme managers about uncertain financing flows. Here teacher education intersects with the nationwide and systemic challenge of redistribution of resources given the inequities between the state and monastic/ethnic systems. Short-term-ism and inadequate funding of interventions to secure long-term follow up may exacerbate existing inequalities.

Thirdly, the interventions reviewed mobilise a range of approaches to understanding teacher agency. Some are emphasising the teacher’s key role in the community and others profile the teacher in relation to more generic skills and competencies. Knowledge pooling through current training initiatives may enrich strategies to take account of the plurality of contexts of teacher’s work and the challenges they face. Here the content of teacher education initiatives benefit from taking into account the voices and vantage points of teachers and are thereby responsive to the micro-practices of their work. Ensuring all interventions provide opportunities to consult teachers in this way may ensure that teacher education contributes to achieving the social justice goal of representation.

Fourthly, while the implicitness of the peacebuilding dimension of teacher education may indeed be a necessity given the politically sensitive nature of the issue within the country, it was clear from our engagement with teachers that some of the knowledges and skills they were learning were perceived to be relevant to the micro realities of their self-defined roles as peacebuilders. There may be an opportunity here to root training - both pedagogical and managerial - more directly and explicitly in the situations and circumstances linked to peace-related processes that teachers are facing and attempting to navigate on a daily basis. Such a situated approach, attuned to the micro-contexts of teacher’s conflict resolution practices, may greatly enhances teacher’s capacity to effect reconciliation processes.

Fifthly, there is perhaps a danger that in the urge to draw on so called international “best practice” from OECD countries, local knowledges and expertise in relation to teacher roles, especially as it has developed within community education, may be side-lined. There lies a danger in losing the valuable, context-responsive indigenous practical wisdom of current teachers, or their “funds of knowledge” (Gonzales, Moll & Amanti 2005, quoted in Metro 2015). Metro concludes convincingly that “Burmese teachers are a valuable resource
that have apparently been underutilised in the government’s current attempts at education reform” (Metro 2015, 223). In relation to the filtering into Myanmar of expertise from abroad, a report on teacher education has observed that:

International borrowing is inevitable and often useful for the development of teacher education. However, models and theories developed in one context should not be imported uncritically to others. Teacher education curricula are needed that, while sometimes using cross-national insights as points of departure, also build on local teacher knowledge, experience and examples of good practice. (Lewin, Keith and Stewart 2003, xvii)

While some of the programmes reviewed above have made attempts to respond to the views of community teachers, the need to build on and start from local knowledges and experiences is particularly important in the Myanmar context, where an influx of international consultants may have distorted this need for a balance between the international and the local in defining content and priorities of teacher education. By acknowledging and valuing the situated knowledge of local teachers, teacher education has the potential to realise a key social justice goal of recognition. In the case of teachers this should privilege attention to the lived realities that condition and constrain their exercise of agency.

Sixthly, teachers communicated some level of frustration at the tension between the structural constraints they were working within and the expectations of trainings in terms of time required for study, meetings, and investment in implementing pedagogical strategies (ints. 59, 60, 64 and 93). Teachers also expressed how expectations within trainings are often unrealistic. Teachers are assumed to employ child-centred approaches, in a context of constraints on time, energy, resources, physical infrastructure, high pupil numbers, parental and community expectations of teacher-led learning, and their work within an assessment regime linked to regular testing. Failure to take account of the lived experience of teachers within trainings may therefore be counter-productive and further undermine low morale. Evoking an experience of being asked to do the impossible, one teacher pointed out that “in Myanmar we say it is like trying to capture frogs with a basket that has a big hole in the bottom” (int. 93). Such comments underscore the importance of tailoring professional development interventions and related ongoing systems of support to the contexts and realities of teacher’s lives as well as being realistic about the pace and level of change that can be expected. Here again, recognition of Myanmar’s teachers within the diverse micro-contexts of their work is at stake.

Finally, there is a danger that the understandable emphasis of teacher education on capacity building will raise expectations in relation to resource distribution and financial investment which are complex and difficult to realise, thereby causing disappointment and undermining motivation and belief in the relevance of such trainings. This conundrum is clearly a reflection of attempting to reform teacher education in an uncertain and volatile cultural political economy environment, where issues of redistribution, representation, recognition and reconciliation are directly felt and experienced by teachers involved.

**Conclusion**

This analysis of teacher education interventions in contemporary Myanmar has revealed several key challenges. These include: a tension between the recourse to international best
practices and the particularities of teachers’ local needs and knowledges; the difficulties of navigating reforms within a volatile cultural political economy landscape and the ongoing legacy of an authoritarian and highly centralised education system; the dangers of collusion by international actors with the reproduction of power asymmetries between different teacher constituencies; and the difficulty of making appropriate judgements about what is realistic and feasible in relation to the pace and scale of reforms.

However, within such a challenging context case studies have also revealed the creativity of international and local actors in developing carefully targeted approaches to enhance teacher education in times of transition. These include site-based collaborative clusters, community rooted content, tailored competency frameworks and a focus on the agency of teacher educators and head teachers. Further reflections have highlighted issues relating to their coherence and sustainability and a tendency to overlook indigenous community based teacher knowledges. Finally, the generally cautious and implicit nature of peacebuilding within training initiatives undertaken is a reminder of the intersection of teacher education reform with a volatile and sensitive political landscape.

References


