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

Chapter 8 – Non-state Teachers in Mon State: Teacher Identity and a Struggle with Inequality

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Abstract
This chapter presents two case studies both conducted in Mon State, Myanmar, focusing on non-state teaching. The case study on monastic teachers’ professional motivations and aspirations highlights religious (Buddhist) values of self-sacrifice and service as a positive resource to the teachers, combined with a perceived responsibility to serve their own disadvantaged communities. Contradictorily, many teachers see teaching at a monastic school as an undesirable long-term job and wish to get a position at a public school. The case study on history teachers in the ethnic education system in Mon State analyses their role in and relation to peace in Myanmar. The two main points of discussion are issues of inequality in comparison to their counterparts in the state system and the building of identity. Findings reveal that the teachers have not yet begun with a process of reconciliation although the state and ethnic education system are trying to increase cooperation.

Introduction
Monastic education and ethnic education are parallel education systems to the state education in Myanmar. While monastic education provides education for over 8,400 (MIMU 2016) of the most disadvantaged children in Mon State, the ethnic education sector in Mon State provides education for approximately 24,000 (Rehmonnya 2016) with many more ethnic students in other parts of the country. Largely, today’s officially recognized monastic education system exists due to the failure of the state to provide education services for all of its citizens (Lorch 2008). The most important distinction between publicly organized education and monastic education is that the former is governed by the Ministry of Education (MoE) while the latter by the Ministry of Religious affairs (MoRA), which are two separate entities within the government system. However, the curriculum employed by both systems is the same, designed nationally by the MoE. Ethnic schools in turn employ mostly their own curriculum in their own language and are completely independent from any governmental institution. They are organized and run by ethnic educational organizations that have developed during the decades of conflict, some of them being more successful than others. In Mon State ethnic education is provided by the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) and has a rather successful history.

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The school system is operated by teachers who are the key determiners of the quality of education. Teachers’ professional identity – the way they see themselves as teachers and their professional work – is reflected in their practice through occupational commitment, job satisfaction, self-efficacy and motivation, which in turn affect learning outcomes (Canrinus 2011). This chapter starts from building on the notion of teachers’ professional identity within monastic schools. Teachers’ professional identity has this far remained unexplored within the studies on monastic education sector in Myanmar (e.g. BIMM & MEDG 2014). Instead, the studies (e.g. BIMM & MEDG 2014; Zobrist 2010) focusing on monastic schools in Myanmar emphasize mostly their needs in terms of facilities, learning materials and teaching methods. The chapter then continues by discussing the notion of identity within MNEC schools, with a specific focus on peacebuilding. The ethnic education system is highly dependent on the willingness and determination of the ethnic teachers to contribute to the educational development of their people. Hence, this case study seeks to engage with the nexus between the role of ethnic history teachers and their contribution to peace. It tries to broaden the understanding on how to enhance the chances for peace through history education in the aftermath of ethnicity-based conflicts by focusing on the teachers’ identity and work environment. Given that in many other countries the function of history teaching is to build a national identity create a feeling of “otherness” towards other nations (McCully 2012), this power of history teaching becomes extremely important in post conflict contexts, where ethnicity is a big source for constructing identity. Therefore this case study focused exclusively on the experiences of history teachers. The Mon education system that is the focus of this case study is a particularly interesting case, because it is often described as a prime example of cooperation between an ethnic education system and the government. As Weldon (2010) indicates, more research is needed on how the experiences, emotions and beliefs of teachers not only filter the curriculum they are teaching, but also alter their role as “peace agents”. This case study seeks to contribute to exactly that knowledge gap in the literature. In the context of Myanmar, the different ethnic identities in the nation state pose simultaneously a very interesting hurdle and a potential tool for the peace process.

While firstly discussing the two case studies on their own, the chapter concludes by bringing together the topics of inequality and religious and ethnic identity much present in the two case studies outlined here.

**Methods**

Both case studies presented here draw primarily on research conducted with non-state teachers in Mon State relating to their experiences of teaching. The fieldworks were carried out between September 2015 and March 2016. Thus, the research data reflects a specific geographic area and time period and what is presented in this chapter does not claim to represent the entire country nor the most recent political shifts.

The case study by Niskanen draws from critical realism (Bhaskar 2013; Archer, Lawson & Norrie 2013). The specific approaches employed to form the theoretical and analytical tools are the strategic relational approach (Hay 2002; Jessop 2005) and an ecological agency framework (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson 2012). Out of the 59 officially recognized monastic schools in Mon State, four urban schools for undertaking the core interviews were chosen.
The selection was made according to criteria of schools being different from one another in terms of size and the proportion of novice monks therein.

The qualitative research by Niskanen employed an exploratory research design (Brown 2006), drawing on the following inquiry techniques: in-depth semi-structured and open-ended interviews with teachers at four monastic schools (n=27); informal interviews with principals and administrative personnel at four monastic schools, and civil society actors (n=23); and non-participatory observations of the monastic schools. The total number of participants was 59. A timeline interview method was used to extrapolate the participants’ life histories, professional backgrounds and motivations to teach. The primary unit of analysis were 11 individuals within four monastic schools currently engaged in teaching. A purposive sampling technique was used in seeking the predefined group of individuals. In the schools, the respondents were either pointed out by the principal monk or as a result of a discussion between the teachers themselves. The process of data analysis was done deductively. Towards the end of the fieldwork period, reflections emerging from the data were presented to and discussed with the principal monks, staff and teachers during a final visit to the monastic schools. The presentation of the preliminary findings enabled a refinement of the emerging findings and served as a form of data validation.

The research by Buske is based on a mixed-methods approach and includes mainly focus groups (n=7) and questionnaires (n=61) with MNEC history teachers. In addition to these, data was collected through observations, identity mapping exercises, MNEC documents and interviews with MNEC representatives. Most of these sessions took place in either the MNEC schools themselves or the New Mon State Party (NMSP) offices of different townships.

The purpose of the focus groups in this research was to grasp multiple perspectives on the issues surrounding history teaching and peace (Kambarelis & Dimitriadis 2013) in a group of MNEC history teachers and involved around 20 open-ended questions. In regard to this particular tool and the role of the local interpreter, open discussions arose and my influence as a researcher was mitigated (Cresswell & Plano Clark 2011). The focus groups were organized in cooperation with the MNEC office based in Mawlamyine and were located in different parts of Mon State. Because of the history of the conflict, the MNEC schools operate mainly in rural areas, which made access sometimes difficult and time consuming. The questions for the focus groups focused on four main domains, namely; school environment, history teaching, peaceful society and identity.

To complement the qualitative data on issues around history teaching and peace, the research used quantitative questionnaires including 30 variables. Their purpose was to gather more comparable data, which helps supply detailed information about individual differences of participants. The indicators were separated into three different groups relating to teacher training and environment; ethnic, identity and values, and demographics. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions (Porst 2011).

Case Study on Monastic Teachers’ Professional Identity in Mon State

This case study explores the worlds of 11 practicing teachers at four monastic schools in Mon State, Myanmar. The specific research question answered is: What are monastic teachers’
professional motivations and aspirations? In answering this question, the theoretical approach this case study adopts is explained first. Then, the context of monastic education within Myanmar is provided, followed by the main findings.

*Defining Teachers’ Professional Identity*

In providing the theoretical frame of the case study, this section discusses the meanings attached to the conception of professional identity. The conception of professional identity is used in various ways within the field of educational studies (Beijaard et al. 2004). It can be broadly “defined as one’s professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences” (Slay & Smith 2011, 86). Some studies (e.g., Knowles 1992; Nias 1989) relate it mainly to teachers’ self-image while other studies (e.g., Goodson & Cole 1994; Volkmann & Anderson 1998) emphasize teachers’ roles, often in relation to other concepts such as reflection or self-evaluation (Beijaard et al. 2004, 108).

Professional identity is multifaceted: “Historical, sociological, psychological, and cultural factors may all influence the teacher’s sense of self as a teacher” (Beijaard et al. 2004, 113). The way teachers see themselves as teachers and their professional work is “based on their interpretations of their continuing interaction with their context” (Canrinus 2011, 7). Such context factors include professional development opportunities, level of autonomy (Canrinus, 2011) and perceived professional expectations from others, such as students, colleagues, parents and the broader society (Beijaard et al. 2014). Personal factors include for instance main reason for becoming a teacher, educational beliefs and experience in education (Canrinus 2011). This means that teachers’ professional identity is closely related to their career motivations and aspirations, which are the focus of this paper. More specifically, the indicators of professional identity manifest themselves in a teacher’s occupational commitment, job satisfaction, self-efficacy and motivation (Canrinus 2011). Another vital factor in the process of identity formation are the biographies and backgrounds of teachers, including factors such as early teacher role models and previous teaching experiences (ibid.).

*Background*

To better communicate the findings of this case study, this section explains the position of monastic education sector within Myanmar. Monasteries have functioned as centres of religious, cultural and social life including informal education for communities in Myanmar for centuries. In fact, monastic education – dating back to the times before state education emerged – was once the pillar of education in Myanmar and catapulted the literacy rate to one of the highest within Asia in the late 1940s and 1950s. Even after the emergence of state education system in the early 20th century, monasteries continued to provide educational opportunities for the learning of basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills in particular to those children whose access to state education was restricted because of long distance or lack of financial resources (Tin 2000).

The range of schooling that took place in monasteries began formalizing over 20 years ago, when monasteries throughout the country were systematically transformed into officially recognized schools that followed the government set curriculum (Education in Myanmar, n.d.). Currently there are over 1.500 of such schools, located in every state and region and providing education for over 250.000 of the most disadvantaged children (MoE...
This accounts for around 16 percent of the total number of the country’s primary and high school pupils (Myanmar Times 2013). These numbers are in the increase (MoE 2014). The majority (70.5%) provide primary education and the rest also lower secondary education (MoE 2014).

In Mon State, the teaching staff within the monastic school sector predominantly consist of female teachers rather than monks and nuns. Additionally, while nearly half of all monastic schools of the country have some boarding students, the total number of novice monks and nuns is way below 15 percent of the monastic student population (BIMM & MEDG 2014). This means that most of the students come from the surrounding neighbourhoods simply to acquire education that compares favourably to that in state schools. Despite the similarities, such as using the same curriculum and being formally recognized by the state, monastic schools have received little, if any, government support in the past (BIMM & MEDG 2014). Moreover, they still largely rely on donations from individuals and the community (ibid.).

**Teachers’ Identity Formed by Experiences, Motivations and Aspirations**

This section discusses the ‘personal’ and the ‘contextual’ of teachers’ professional self-identity. More specifically, the case study identifies five components of teachers’ professional self-identity: (1) personal biographies and backgrounds of teachers; (2) religious (Buddhist) faith; (3) perceived professional expectations from others; (4) teachers’ professional wellbeing; and (5) teachers’ professional development opportunities. This is necessarily a simplified presentation of the complex processes of teacher professional identity formation and in reality the components are largely overlapping and interlinked.

This section argues that the impact of these components on monastic teachers’ professional identity ranges from positive to negative. The positive motivating factors and resources include teachers’ dedication to their own disadvantaged communities and being able to relate to their students’ situations. Additionally, religious (Buddhist) values of self-sacrifice and service are an important positive resource to the teachers, driving teachers in their work. Religious faith arises as a key to understanding teachers’ professional identity in this specific monastic school context, faith framing their motivations and activities as teachers. Somewhat contradictorily, monastic teachers might have compassion for the poor and be professionally motivated but on the other hand, many of them see teaching at a monastery as an undesirable long-term job. Teachers are challenged because of their lack of professional qualifications, insufficient salary and poor working conditions. At monastic schools, teacher management and professional expectations of obedience mean that teachers have limited power in decision-making. Additionally, the perceived expectations from the students’ parents create challenges. The hardships teachers experience in teaching generate negative self-perceptions of being underprivileged and feelings of inferiority to the public-school teachers. Therefore, many of the interviewed teachers are thinking about getting out of teaching at the particular monastic school and getting a position at a public school.

**The Positive and the Negative of Teachers’ Backgrounds**

Most of the interviewed teachers come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Despite poverty, nearly all of the teachers managed to pursue education in public schools, half of
them having graduated from a university or being currently enrolled as a distance student. While most of them have a solid education background, not many have prior experience in teaching before the current position and none of the teachers has a teaching certificate. Most teachers are relatively new in their current teaching position, with less than two years of experience at the school. At the other end of the spectrum is a group of senior teachers (including the two monks) who have been already teaching at the school for well over 10 years. All the 11 teachers interviewed are Buddhist, mostly female and predominantly of Bamar (i.e. Burmese) ethnicity, which is the dominant ethnic group in Myanmar. The median age is 30, while the youngest teacher is 17 and the oldest 70.

The fact that the monastic teachers themselves come from lower socio-economic backgrounds has both weaknesses and strengths in relation to their work. The weakness is they have limited educational opportunities due to a lack of financial capital, which leads to a lack of professional qualifications: the interviews found that many teachers’ education has been interrupted or challenged by the financial hardship of their families. For the same reasons many have not been able to pursue a teaching certificate. This indicates a mismatch between teachers’ qualifications and the demands of the job. At the same time, due to their own backgrounds, teachers show empathy for their students’ life situation. For instance, one interviewed teacher responded:

Teachers need to understand their students, their lives and feelings. This means that (...) sometimes a student is in a very difficult position because parents really need help at home or elsewhere. It is not up to the student and in such situations teacher should not scold the student but be understanding.

In addition to compassion and understanding, it is noteworthy that teachers are essentially serving their own poor communities: a majority of the interviewed teachers come from the same area where their current working place is located. This contributes to the dedication of teachers to serve/help their own poor communities.

**Teachers Serving their Communities**

Teachers at the four monastic schools strongly view themselves as community leaders, which becomes visible through both ideology (status and religious faith) and practice. First, the way teachers talk about themselves in connection to the status teachers have in their community reflects their professional identity. Providing moral guidance by teaching “good behaviour” to the students is seen as an essential task of a teacher. Especially the male teachers (monks) express such goals, as can be expected in line with the Buddhist ideology. Furthermore, when discussing their own childhood school years, the teachers point out reasons why they highly admired specific teachers for specific characteristics: “telling what is good and what is bad”, “teaching clearly without need for tuition”, “having a good nature and kind heart”, “being

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2 All of the nine female teachers participating in this study have their educational background from public primary and secondary schools. One male teacher (monk), attended a school up to grade five until the building was destroyed due to war, after which he went to a monastery. The other male teacher (monk) continued studying Buddha education at a monastery after grade eight at a public school.

3 Seven out of the 11 come from a city where the four schools integral to this study were based and the rest four teachers come from smaller villages either within the same state or Kayin state.
caring like a parent”, “providing free tuition” and “teaching communication skills”. These are the early teacher role models integral to their biographies, influencing teachers’ self-perception today.

The data also shows that teachers’ professional identity is closely tied to the idea of service and self-sacrifice. Service is a key feature of Buddhist faith and the interviewed teachers work in a highly Buddhist milieu of monasteries. Therefore, this self-perception is particularly present amongst monastic teachers. However, paradoxically, the reason why many young female teachers aim to become public school teachers is because they believe only then can they serve the nation. For instance, one teacher commented: “I want to teach in state school in my village because I want to serve national duty”.

Monastic teachers’ status in general seems to be subordinate to their state-school counterparts. One male teacher (monk), for instance, points out how some teachers are not eager to participate in teacher education courses provided by the government because they feel being looked down on by the public school teachers. Additionally, many monastic teachers express opinions that public school teachers are in many ways in a better position.

Secondly, the day-to-day practices of teachers show how they actively work as leaders of their communities. This study identified the relationship with community and students as the main challenge teachers face in their day-to-day working environment. A reason for this, substantially discussed by the interviewed teachers, is the student composition. Since students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, it is not surprising that students’ home situations bring challenges to teachers. One teacher explains: “Students cannot study at home. They cannot do their homework because parents need their help with work”. Such statements are common amongst the teachers. It is generally understood that monastic school kids’ help is needed at home, which also results in absences and dropouts. Teachers seem to have developed many tactics to deal with the challenges regarding the relationship with community. Most importantly, there is a strong recognition amongst the interviewed teachers that talking with communities and getting the families on their side is a key in negotiating their constraints.

Professional Expectations from Others
Teachers’ surroundings affect their identity as a teacher (Canrinus 2011). Within the schools visited for this study, patriarchal structures of governance are vastly present. As highlighted in Chapter 6, the gendered nature of the teaching profession in Myanmar reproduces gender hierarchies within the sector. This is also evident in the four monastic schools: most teachers are women, operating within a feminized profession that is, at the same time, a strongly male dominated environment in that monks are holding much higher prestige and mostly the ones holding administrative positions. The above links to issues of management of teachers and professional expectations of obeisance. Myanmar is characterized by a top-down management culture, and teacher governance and management within monastic schools are not free from such structures. Professional expectations of obeisance much present in the entire country in particular exist within the monastic sector where religious hierarchies are strong.
A second key point in connection to expectations is related to the fact that monastic education forms an opportunity for the economically marginalized parents to get an education for their children. It is safe to say that they see education as a source of power and therefore set expectations on the education. In teachers’ opinion, a common approach by the students’ parents is to compare the monastic schools to public schools. Explained by one teacher:

Most parents take children to this school because they cannot afford government school (...) they expect teachers and the education to have the same level than government schools. “This is the biggest pressure”, asserts one principal monk. Hence, the professional identity of many teachers is impacted by their own perceptions of these expectations.

Teachers’ Wellbeing and Future Aspirations
Teachers’ emotional or mental condition with respect to happiness and enthusiasm at work is tightly connected to professional identity. Reflecting the discussions in Chapters 5 and 6, the monastic teachers highlight the lack of pay as a factor that majorly affects their personal wellbeing. Eight out of the nine teachers receiving salary point out that the salary is insufficient. Another factor affecting teachers’ wellbeing is the apparent mismatch between teacher qualifications and the demands of their job, as already referred to earlier. In addition to lack of pay and qualifications, teachers’ wellbeing is challenged with poor working conditions of monastic schools. Infrastructural constraints including the physical building, resources, curriculum and time-constraints are all factors that bring challenges, highlighted by the teachers.

Likewise, teachers’ self-identity is connected to the ways they see themselves in future. The way they see themselves as teachers and their professional work develops “based on their interpretations of their continuing interaction with their context” (Canrinus 2011, 7), which include factors such as professional development opportunities and level of autonomy (Canrinus 2011).

Indeed, a wish for professional development comes up a lot: a need for enhancing one’s teaching skills and general knowledge dominates amongst the teachers. Many express hopes that government and NGOs would organize teacher education courses. Interestingly, the interviews also prove insights about the divisions between the different education sectors in a way that monastic teachers feel inferior to public school teachers. Sentiments are expressed that there are problems of mixing public schoolteachers and monastic schoolteachers within a single course, as one individual explains in connection to government-organized course on child-centred approaches to teaching:

Government teachers think they are better (...) and that’s why monastic teachers don’t like to participate the course. (...) There are many ways to teach but the government teachers (...) believe that their way is the only good one, not the other way explained by the monastery teacher.

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4 The two male teachers (monks) are excluded from this count as the monastic rules prohibit them to handle money or gain salary.
To some extent, this corroborates what is written in the second case study of this Chapter about the resentment of the ethnic school teachers of public school teachers (see section below). The interviews with the 11 monastic teachers show that there is a resentment that the monastic sector is different from the state sector with the result that many monastic teachers feel belittled and underprivileged. The development of monastic teachers’ professional identity takes place in relation to the other, in this case to the public-school teachers.

In terms of more long-term professional development aspirations, the data reveals that most of the teachers interviewed (six out of 11) aspire to become a public school teacher – this despite the seeming dedication to the monastic school sector discussed earlier. More specifically, those who have been working at the school for a relatively short time tend to desire to become a public school teacher. Many of them want to pursue a teacher education degree or finish their studies at university and then work at a public school. Gaining experience at a monastic school helps to get into teacher Education College, which in turn guarantees a position at a public school. Explained by one teacher: “I want to become a good teacher and next year will attend Education College for four months and then teach at a government school”. Indeed, one recent study has found that:

[S]taff recruitment and retention was reported to be difficult - monastic schools compete with government schools for teaching staff, and cannot match the salaries offered in government schools. (BIMM & MEDG 2014, 3)

The findings presented in this section support such sentiments.

The reasons to pursue a position at public school include better financial security (such as higher pay and retirement money), serving the nation, enhancing teaching skills, and higher status. The government of Myanmar has recently decided to employ and train more than 100.000 teachers to public schools (Myanmar Times, 2016). Where do these teachers come from? Based on this study, it is reasonable to predict that if access to public schools is made easier by lowering requirements, many monastic teachers might opt for that. This may pose a real risk that monastic schools could be losing many of their teachers to the public school sector, unless the monastic school position is made an equally attractive option. If monastic teachers do not have a feeling that they can develop professionally, if they do not get sufficiently salary or if they feel less valued in their current position at the monastic schools, the future image of monastic schools within the country’s educational landscape might be uncertain. This is alarming since education services provided by the monasteries have an important function as a social safety net for those segments of Myanmar’s society that cannot afford the costs of public education.

Case Study on History Teachers in MNEC schools and their vision on peace

This section presents the results drawn from the case study based on ethnic teachers in Mon State. In order to set the scene and introduce the main participants it starts with giving a small overview of the background situation and contextualises therefore the following empirical sections. After a brief theoretical excursion, the section continues discussing experiences of inequality that became evident through this research. Lastly, issues of identity such as
language, ethnicity and religion are broached with the aim of giving evidence on consequences for the teachers’ ability to act as ‘peace agents’.

**Theoretical Background of the Case Study**

The role of teachers in the ethnic education system is one of particular interest when considering the important role those actors are given in the theoretical debate around education and peacebuilding. Teachers’ identities become deeply internalised and bolstered with group memories (Weldon 2010). As Leach and Humphreys (2007) indicate, teachers not only act positively for the peace process but are also capable of representing their own biases in the classroom and reproducing inequalities. The perception of a teacher’s representation of the past influences both teaching practices and attitudes (Murphy & Gallagher 2009). But as teachers are the ones transmitting collective memory, which is highly linked to identity building to future generations (Panteli & Zembylas 2013), the linkage between teacher environment, own background and performance as ‘agents for peace’ is extremely important. In post-conflict contexts especially the role of teachers in history classes is influential (Freedman et al. 2008; McCully 2012; Metro 2013)

Aside from the important role of teachers in peacebuilding, the teaching on history holds a great potential to lead children to a peaceful future for their country and is a major feature of identity and nation building. As Freedman et al (2008, 666) argue:

> In the aftermath of conflict, revising the content of history curricula presents states with an important means of conveying new narratives of the past, which influence the national identity of citizens, particularly those of the next generation.

While the function of history in most countries is to build a national identity and shared history to create a feeling of “otherness” towards other nations (McCully 2012), this power of history teaching becomes extremely important in post conflict contexts, where ethnicity is a big source for constructing identity. McCully (2012) suggests that the creation of a unified national identity is especially difficult in contexts where different ethnicities have experienced discrimination over decades. The strong connection between the history curricula one is taught and the way one’s own identity is built emphasizes why research on history teaching in post-conflict countries is so crucial (Cupcea 2014).

**Teachers’ Environment – A Clear Vision of Inequality**

This section seeks to explain how inequalities between the state and the Mon education system are impacting MNEC teachers negatively and therefore curbing their ability to promote a sustainable peace process. It is argued that through enhanced cooperation between the MNEC and the government, inequalities in school facilities, salary or teacher trainings become more visible, which instead of fostering peacebuilding, endangers any transition from negative to positive peace long-term. As one teacher expressed is the discussion around equality for her the prerequisite for peace: “Equal rights and then we can say it is peaceful Burma” (F5, female teacher). This desire for equality and equal rights can be explained by the many inequalities teachers face in their personal lives as Mon people, but also in their position as teachers in MNEC schools. Fighting inequalities and guaranteeing equal rights is perceived as full recognition of the ethnic identity and would contribute to a peaceful Myanmar.
Inequalities in the Teachers’ Position, Environment and Training: The Struggle for Recognition and Redistribution

One of the first steps of the government in 2011 was to increase the salary of social servants, including the base teacher salary (Lall 2016). One of the interviewees reported that the state teachers now earn around 150,000 kyat per month (for middle school teachers), which equates to around $110. On the contrary, the MNEC teachers earn 20,000 kyat per month at maximum (around $15). This increase in state salaries resulted in greater pay inequalities between state and MNEC teachers and had the effect of increasing discrimination against MNEC teachers, who feel less worthy.

Therefore, one of the biggest conflict issues that arose during the focus group discussions was the payment gap between state and MNEC teachers. The quantitative data suggests that many MNEC teachers are not satisfied with their payment, because it is most of the time irregular and not enough to make a decent living. More than 70% of the participants vary between categories from 1-3, with 1 meaning ‘not satisfied at all’ and 5 meaning ‘totally satisfied’ with their salary.

As one of the officers at the MNEC explained, most teachers get paid every three months, sometimes even longer due to budget constraints. This payment is handed out by their head teachers, who get the money from the township officer, who himself gets it from the MNEC office. Salaries have to take a long journey through the system before they arrive at the individual teacher, and although there is no evidence of corruption, it is a fact that the teachers occasionally do not get paid at all.

The unequal distribution of salary between the state and the MNEC teachers has strained relationships between the two groups, largely due to feelings of discrimination stemming from the salary discrepancy. Additionally, the MNEC teachers, as the quote below highlights, hold the government responsible for the problem, which has a negative impact on their perception of the government in general. Not only are the individual relationships damaged, but a new negative characteristic of the ‘other’ is also created – they willingly do not support MNEC to harm the Mon people. As the teacher described in this example:

For the salary, for the allowance of the salary [we] already asked the government to pay more and the government [did] not allow. (F2, female teacher)

As one participant expressed, many Mon teachers believe that the government does not want to support MNEC on issues of the teacher salaries. This mind set nurtures resentment against the government and the state teachers, who are mainly Bamar, and increases the division between “us” and “the other”.

The quantitative data slightly suggests that teachers who are more satisfied with their salary are more likely to believe in a peaceful future as all of the teachers who are totally satisfied with their salary, totally believe in a peaceful future. It seems that if the burden of worrying about surviving from one’s salary is taken away and teachers are better able to provide for a family, they are subsequently encouraged to envision a peaceful future.

In discussing teacher training sessions, many teachers expressed how it helped them to become better teachers by learning new teaching methods, materials and skills such as time planning and management. One teacher indicated that the training removed a burden
for her: “Before [I] didn’t join [the teacher training], [I] was tired of teaching.” (F7, young female teacher). Such training allows teachers to perform better and the children are happier with the lessons. Most of the teachers had attended short in-service teacher training provided by the MNEC, which are normally anywhere between 10 and 45 days and are done alongside teaching in class. The two most popular ones among the teachers that were interviewed were “Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking” and “Child Centre Approach”. When the teachers were describing a ‘good teacher’ from their perspective, the words ‘child centred’ and ‘critical thinking’ were often repeated. It suggests that the training sessions had an effect on the teachers’ idea about what constitutes good teaching. The question remains how it is transferred in the classroom.

Although many of the teachers had teacher training, the data shows that not all of them got a certificate for it or were aware that they got one. Either way, the consequence is the same; teachers felt that their training was not worth as much as the training of government teachers, even though it helped them improve their own teaching skills. As one teacher described:

Most say that the teacher teaching under the government school, they have more skill and then kind of they already graduated, a little bit they look down, they discriminate the teacher from the MNEC. (F7, female teacher)

This feeling of not being worth as much as the “other” side results in a hierarchy among teachers and education systems, further fuelling conflicts and disagreements. Most of the teacher trainings are not recognised by the government and this makes it difficult for MNEC teachers to compete with state teachers.

Inequalities between recognised certifications and training further divide the teacher groups and school system as MNEC teachers are limited to the MNEC system, which is not the desired aim when trying to foster cooperation in order to promote a peaceful coexistence. Although through a recent change of policies and a shortage of state teachers the government has increasingly employed MNEC teachers, it is not perceived as progress towards more recognition of ethnic teachers. MNEC teachers rather expressed the feeling that the government is ‘stealing’ MNEC teachers because there is no alternative solution. The result is that MNEC teachers feel the government is exploiting them and causing the recruitment problem MNEC is facing. Hence, the attitude towards the government worsens and a peaceful cooperation is less likely.

Nevertheless, I did experience in some regions and schools an increase in cooperation between state and MNEC teachers. In some so called “mixed schools”, where MNEC sends a teacher to teach Mon language and history in state schools, or in monthly meetings between the school teachers encouraged by MNEC and the government. The mixed schools approach seems to be a good way of combining the two education systems, but it also entails some risks. The government indeed allows Mon language and history in state schools, but does not support the teaching. The financial and organisational burden is shouldered by the MNEC, and more particularly by the teachers. This uneven distribution of responsibility and resources makes it difficult for the MNEC and their teachers to sustain such practices in the future and doesn’t support a shared process of alignment. This example shows that while an increase in encounters and cooperation are
forms of desired progress between the two former conflict groups, they can have negative effects if the cooperation is unequally divided, especially when the ethnic minority has to put in more effort than they can afford. It suggests that in order to strengthen reconciliation efforts such as by increasing encounters, other dimensions of the peace process, like the redistribution of these encounters, need to be settled first. Some teachers expressed, as demonstrated in the quote below, that the monthly meetings stress them rather than actually supporting the intergroup relationships, although they acknowledge that it also has positive effects in the contact with each other:

During their holiday they want to relax, but they have to participate in government group, no more time with the family, more time with the state. (F2, older group of female teachers)

Increasing cooperation and the number of encounters with the aim of developing a peaceful relationship between state schools and MNEC schools, has turned out to have the opposite effect, and is perceived as a hardship within the group of MNEC teachers. During many focus groups discussions, inequalities between the state teachers and the Mon teachers on various levels were talked about intensively. Although the salary is one of the biggest issues, the training and facilities also play a role. It is obvious that these inequalities are a major problem for the MNEC teachers to truly engage in a process of reconciliation with the state. Next to the discussion about inequalities, increasing encounters and cooperation between the two education systems became evident as well, whether on the school level, with the monthly meetings of the ‘mixed school’ approach, or on the MNEC office level, with increasing development of shared programs and meetings. Unfortunately, the inequalities become more visible by the increasing encounters between teachers. While the education systems were separate, MNEC teachers were aware of the differences, but did not have to face them on a daily basis. This increasing awareness of inequalities results in MNEC teachers holding the government responsible, which is counterproductive for the wider peace process the MNEC is involved in. The major finding is that although the cooperation between the MNEC and the state schools aims to contribute to the peace process, it is often a financial and time burden for the MNEC teachers and has a negative impact on the relationships. It is argued that through increasing encounters between individuals from the former conflict parties, bonds can be developed, which would help the individuals reconcile with the past. This case study suggests that the reconciliation dimension has negative impacts if the context, in this case that of teachers, is not considered. They are not prepared for these encounters and therefore cannot profit from them.

Inequality in the Political Sphere - The Lack of Representation

Inequalities were not only visible on a financial or resource level of teachers. Many participants expressed that the democratic system works unevenly for different groups of society and they felt disadvantaged. Hence, the general attitude towards democracy was negative, which will be explored in the following section. It provides an interpretation of the teachers’ perception of democracy and critically analyses the impact on the peace process.

The former president of Myanmar Thein Sein said: “There can never be peace without democracy nor democracy without peace” (cited in Lall, 2016: 104) and thereby stressed the government’s view on democracy and its importance for the future of the country. The extent
to which the system under the rule of Thein Sein was in reality a democratic system has been
debated, but nevertheless, it demonstrates that democratic processes are valued by the
national government.

You know, our Mon we don’t know about democracy. We know about our federalism.
(F5, male head teacher)
This quote, above, expresses the idea I was repeatedly hearing from teachers talking about
democracy. It is interesting for two reasons. The first part entails an argument many teachers
were using, saying that people are not educated enough to participate in the elections or
understand the democratic system. Secondly, the last part of the quote is related to the wish
of self-determination. The teachers do not believe that democracy will change anything for
ethnic minorities, but prioritise federal decision making processes, which enables them to be
independent and autonomous within the country.

Although it was an extremely interesting time politically while this research was
conducted, with the second democratic elections having recently been held (with the majority
of votes going to the NLD) and it was close to the announcement of the new president,
teachers in Mon State did not share the excitement: “The democracy meaning is very good,
very powerful. But after a while democracy is bla bla bla” (F4, group of young female teacher).

The general attitude towards democracy is best encapsulated in this quote. It is
explained by disappointments from the past and the legacy of the military dictatorship, that
people are not yet able to believe the situation has changed and will have a long-term effect.
Scepticism and indifference describes best the position most teachers were taking. The
government was mostly referred to as the “Burmese government” which demonstrates how
the teachers distance themselves and their ethnicity from democracy and the political entity.
The distinction between “us and them” in political terms hinders nation-building efforts and
decreases the government’s legitimacy, which ultimately prevents the Mon people from
identifying themselves with the new democratic nation: “The teacher said, she doesn’t
believe, they [the government] are not working with us” (F2, female teacher).

Hand in hand with the desire for equal rights and political representation, explained
above, came the fear of losing what and who the Mon are. It is a result of being afraid that
the Mon people, the language, the culture and their traditions could disappear. For the
teachers, the solution to the problem is to protect it by reaching for autonomy. One female
teacher indicates that a loss of nationality is always caused by someone taking it: “We worry
for our nationality, if someone destroys it or taking it” (F2, female teacher).

Teachers in every focus group exclusively identified with the Mon ethnicity. Being
someone was strongly linked to being Mon, which always entailed an element of exclusion
towards others. Having ethnicity as the unifying element of the group goes hand in hand with
separation from others. Some teachers accordingly expressed feelings of superiority as
demonstrated in this quote: “Yes, we are Mon. We don’t feel national, we have more
superiority” (F3, female teacher). This demarcation especially from Burmese people is
legitimised through religion and history, but also through factors such as the visual nature and
the behaviour. One teacher listed unique Mon characteristics that legitimised this superiority:
We have fight about things, but we are the first to meet Buddha. We are the first with donations (...), we are the first one to apply religion, we have the hair of the Buddha, we are the first ones to build a pagoda. (F3, older female teacher)

The connection between religion and the Mon identity is remarkable, introduced through the teachers into the classroom and therefore has a great impact on how identity is built through Mon education.

The “other” is created by legitimising a superiority that cannot be reached unless you are Mon. Its source is ultimately ethnicity, which is no one able to choose freely. In this sense it endangers a peaceful coexistence with other groups in the country because there can never be a unifying element. Nation-building efforts have no effect on the Mon teachers, because they don’t identify at all with the nation. The wish for self-determination is a result of an ethnic identity that is described as unique and superior.

The MNEC has often been described as a prime example of how ethnic education can work with the state education system for many legitimate reasons, such as the combined curriculum, mother-tongue education and the possibility for students to transfer into the state education system (Lall & South 2014). As Lall and South (2014) suggest:

State support and the development and rooting of ethnic identity is, therefore, essential for the multi-ethnic population to possess a sense of inclusion, which in turn will spur and enhance loyalty for a national language. (Lall & South 2014, 4)

This research raises the question of what happens if the ethnic identity is defined by an ethnic superiority and does therefore not enhance loyalty to the nation.

The findings of this research give glimpses of how identity is created in MNEC schools. Feelings of pride and exclusivity were often the main markers for the Mon identity. It was exclusively connected to the ethnicity and there were almost no identifications with something else, such as a concept of the nation. It was revealed that identity in MNEC schools do not promote a process of building an ethnic as well as a national identity, but quite the opposite. The identity building process in MNEC schools is therefore an issue that negatively affects the peace process.

Conclusion
This chapter has presented two case studies both conducted in Mon State Myanmar focusing on non-state teaching. Although the case studies are very different, they both feature the topics of inequality and religious and ethnic identity.

Teachers in both monastic and ethnic education speak about similar dilemmas regarding their lack of professionalism, job chances and salary. They seem to be well aware of their unequal position in comparison to the state schools in terms of redistribution of government resources to education. Largely, teachers in both monastic and ethnic education exhibit negative self-perceptions of being underprivileged and feelings of inferiority to the public-school teachers. This increasing awareness of inequalities results in MNEC teachers holding the government responsible, which is counterproductive for the wider peace process the MNEC is involved in. In the case of monastic schools, the inequalities result that many of the interviewed teachers are thinking about getting out of teaching at the particular monastic school and getting a position at a public school. Within MNEC education, the motivation to
protect their ethnic identity somehow weight out these constraints coming with the profession of an ethnic teacher. Within monastic education, religious (Buddhist) values of self-sacrifice and service are an important positive resource to the teachers, framing their motivations and activities as teachers. Other positive resources are teachers’ dedication to their own disadvantaged communities and being able to relate to their students’ situations.

The ongoing education sector reform taking place in Myanmar provides an opportunity to guarantee that monastic and ethnic schools receive a better share from the country’s education provisions. This requires that the position of non-state education within the National Education Law (NEL), currently under revision, is clarified and that its many bylaws, regulations and subsections are formulated with holding non-state education sector in a position of high importance. It is recommended to open up the reform process especially for non-state education systems and organisations as they play a pivotal role in the provision of basic education for the rural ethnic population and should also be able to contribute their vision of education to the reform. Separating state and ethnic and monastic education is a step in the wrong direction if the aim is combining the education systems and appreciating differences in the country.

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