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

Chapter 10 — Prioritising Education: Youth Experiences within Formal and Non-formal Education Contexts

Elizabeth J. T. Maber, Naw Tha Ku Paul, Aye Aye Nyein, Sean Higgins

University of Cambridge, Point B and University of Amsterdam

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Elizabeth Maber¹, Naw Tha Ku Paul, Aye Aye Nyein, and Sean Higgins

Abstract

Education occupies a key position amongst the priorities of young people, especially where prior experiences in formal education settings have frequently been negative or exclusionary. This chapter explores the issues that were identified by young people participating in the research as central concerns and positions the role of education within these, before going on to examine some of the specific dimensions of youth experiences in formal schooling. We then present three case studies of non-formal education initiatives that provide alternative examples of the ways in which programmes working with youth may support dimensions of youth agency and empowerment for transformation.

Introduction

This chapter highlights the issues that diverse young people participating in the research raised as affecting their agency for transformation. Education emerged as a central factor for young people in shaping opportunities and in both constraining and advancing their possibilities for action, with formal and non-formal education practices being seen as offering differing opportunities to respond to youth concerns. A total of 80 youth perspectives (46 male and 34 female) informed these findings across the range of youth constituencies that make up our research. While the majority of the young people involved in the research were from Mon and Yangon regions, participants in the discussions referenced here also came from Ayewaddy, Bago, Kayah, Mandalay, Rakhine, Sagaing, and Shan and included Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and non-faith youth. Additionally, data is drawn from interviews with five youth leaders (four female and one male) which also focused on their ability to take action on the issues that concern them. To the extent that it was practicable, an effort was made to maintain gender-balance in our engagement with youth participants in all initiatives.

The chapter begins with an overview of the issues prioritised by youth during the focus group discussions and interviews. A brief discussion of these issues is provided, before exploring the perspectives expressed with regards to education in more detail. In particular, attention is drawn to gendered experiences within formal education and factors that were identified as constraining youth agency for transformation. Subsequently, three case studies of non-formal education initiatives for youth in Yangon and Mon State are presented outlining the ways in which these initiatives seek to enhance dimensions of youth agency, and the perspectives of those youth participating in them. Finally, the chapter draws together reflections on these varied learning experiences and youth agency for peacebuilding.

¹ Corresponding author: Elizabeth J.T. Maber, University of Cambridge, ejtm2@cam.ac.uk
Positioning Education within Priorities for Youth

In reporting youth perceptions of their priorities, we are mindful that they may not be in a position to identify all the factors which may enhance or undermine their agency, following Lukes’ (1974) attention to covert and frequently unrecognised structural sources of disempowerment. It is acknowledged therefore that the issues raised here may only reflect a partial view of the concerns affecting young people and are also limited to the experiences of those 80 individuals taking part in the discussions. Nonetheless, within the breadth of concerns and priorities expressed by youth participating in the research, it is apparent that issues relating to experiences within education and the relevance of learning occupy a central position.

Building on the contextualisation of agency and diverse youth constituencies outlined in Chapter 9, the chart below illustrates a summary of the issues that were raised by youth participants in discussions as priorities for them, and the frequency with which this occurred. These issues were frequently identified as limiting young peoples’ possibilities to take action in ways that would improve the lives of themselves and others. During individual interviews and small group discussions participants were asked to detail, either verbally or by listing them on paper, the issues that were primary preoccupations for them and that they saw as needing to be addressed in order to improve their daily lives. Figure 10.1 shows the themes of these issues and the number of times each was raised by different groups, with details of the themes being expanded under the subheadings below.

**Figure 10.1 Summary chart of issues raised by youth**

![Chart](image)

**Education**

As will be explored in greater depth below, experiences within education environments as well as the level and quality of knowledge that young people had access to was the most frequent concern that youth raised, stressing a feeling that their education had not prepared them to face the tasks that they wanted to achieve (ints. 24, 38, 44, 65, 68, 69, 114, 115 and 117). For five participants, the lack of opportunity to access formal schooling had contributed to their experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, with poverty being a particular barrier
for those of lower socio-economic status (ints. 24 and 118). Likewise, negative experiences in education including discrimination by teachers or exclusion were also particularly highlighted by disabled and LGBT youth as frustrations that had limited opportunities available for these youth and had also contributed to the dis-incentivised remaining in school or continuing education (ints. 24, 88 and 116).

**Pressures**

Time commitments, particularly for those in employment, were strongly articulated as causing issues for young people (ints. 29, 114 and 117). Trying to balance family responsibilities with work and participating in further study or volunteering left young people exhausted and put stress on their relationships (ints. 29 and 114). One young man commented: “After night shifts at work, I have to get up early to [study] in the early morning. I have to fight sleepiness with coffee” (int. 117). Likewise, after-school tuition was also identified as contributing to pressures on students, both in terms of adding expectation that they obtain high grades in their school exams and in terms of reducing their time to relax after the end of the school day (int. 113). Despite health issues for some young people, the commitment to work, study, volunteering and activism demonstrated dedication on the part of these youth leaders both to improving their situation and that of their communities (ints. 14, 18, 114, 115 and 117). However, these stresses remain little researched, indicating a need for further attention to the psychological as well as physical impact of pressures experienced by young people.

**Work and Income**

The lack of job opportunities and the low salaries for those young people in employment was also frequently raised as causing difficulties, and was identified as a limitation for them to exercise agency and control over their choices (ints. 24, 38, 44, 57, 67, 68 and 88). However, poverty and a desire to maximise work opportunities were motivating factors for some to pursue education and to engage in community work to improve their situations (ints. 24, 57, 65 and 117). The low reward for these pursuits was a frustration, and the financial strain placed on individuals by volunteering was expressed as a tension that at times restricted their agency to participate (ints. 14 and 114).

**Sex and Gender Issues**

As also explored further below, the gendered nature of experiences within and beyond education environments was frequently articulated. The discrimination and inequality that were a feature of their experiences and witnessed in their communities were voiced particularly by the young women interviewed and by members of the LGBT community as concerns affecting their agency (ints. 24, 38, 67, 70 and 88). Violence against women, abortion, rape, early marriage and trafficking were identified as prevalent issues, interestingly more so amongst the marginalised urban youth interviewed than rural respondents, despite the widespread practice of these abuses in all areas. The importance of and need for sex education and knowledge of safe sexual practice were also stressed by these youth (ints. 24 and 88).
**Health**

General health problems, lack of access to health facilities and lack of specific awareness of HIV prevention, diagnosis and treatment were all raised as concerns (ints. 24, 69, 88 and 117), as well as a lack of reproductive health awareness (int. 24). In both rural and urban areas drug use was also highlighted as a prominent concern (ints. 24, 38 and 69). These were seen as limiting young people’s well-being but also restricting their capacity to take action. Additionally, as also highlighted above, mental health, and specifically depression, was identified as an issue that was related both to the overburdening of young people due to financial, social and familial pressures (int. 117) and also an effect of cultural discrimination (int. 68).

**Direct Violence**

Many youth participants reported having experienced direct violence including in conflict areas, from authorities, within their communities, in schools and in the home. For some young people, experiences of direct violence in the community and in the home prompted their concerns for others in shared situations (ints. 24, 67, 88 and 116). For others, witnessing the effects of conflict supported their desire to advocate for peace (ints. 14, 18, 29, 65 and 68).

**Restricted Space for Political Manoeuvre**

Being required to get permission from authorities before undertaking any activities was often raised as imposing limits on youth actions (ints. 65, 59, 115, 116). As one youth leader highlighted: “it’s not culturally acceptable to do things or activities without the elder or authorities’ permission” (int. 115). The perspective highlights the cultural nature of this restriction, not limited to an effect of authoritarian rule. Likewise, restrictions on movement (int. 69), the lack of spaces for youth (ints. 29 and 65), lack of political provisions (ints. 14 and 18) and the oppressive character of the Constitution (ints. 14 and 69) were all identified as further limiting youth space for manoeuvre.

**Inclusion and Recognition**

Issues of inclusion and recognition of rights were highlighted by those who felt excluded, particularly with regard to ethnic or cultural identity (ints. 67, 68 and 69), and marginalised in education systems (int. 116). In addition, a number of youth leaders identified the need for a "people centred" model of development and reform as being important to address the concerns of young people (ints. 14, 18 and 65).

**Discrimination**

Similar to expressing a desire for inclusion, discrimination on the bases of ethnicity (ints. 65, 67 and 68), gender (ints. 18, 24 and 38), sexual orientation (int. 88) and disability (int. 116) were all identified as issues impacting young people which limited their agency. One disabled activist confessed “it is too difficult for [the community] to change their negative attitudes towards disability” (int. 116). However, in these cases education was frequently identified as a means to combat negative stereotypes and discrimination. In this case, the same activist continued, “to overcome this challenge, these concepts are provided in training and advocacy in understandable versions” (int. 116). Experiences of discrimination were therefore sometimes a motivation to prompt action and bring youth together.
Environmental Issues
For some youth, environmental issues were highlighted (ints. 14, 38, 67, 68 and 69). These were of particular concern for those who were directly affected by extraction sites for oil, gas and minerals (ints. 14 and 38). The need to protect natural resources was therefore associated more with the impact of industry on young people’s present lives than in relation to a future hope for conservation. Land rights were also similarly raised by those who were directly affected by the arbitrary confiscation of land (int. 67). These issues were also closely connected by young people to the concepts of peace and justice (ints. 14 and 68) as highlighted below when connecting to young people’s priorities for peace.

IT Use & Poor Infrastructure
Other issues prioritised by the youth interviewed were poor infrastructure, IT use and access, and the need for English language skills. Infrastructure, particularly in relation to the lack of transport (ints. 18, 68 and 69) and lack of electricity (int. 69) for remote and rural youth offered constraints. Making use of IT and English language classes (ints. 24, 38, 57, 67 and 117) were seen as opportunities for young people to connect beyond their immediate experiences.

Relating Priority Issues to Peacebuilding
Notably, in these discussions peacebuilding was not frequently raised explicitly by youth themselves, but emphasis was placed on the challenges that they experienced as the concerning issues for them. While it was recognised that a priority for peace was an end to war and fighting, the majority of youth we spoke to were not directly affected by fighting. Rather, these youth respondents tended to characterise experiences of structural violence as disrupting their goal of peaceful existence as well as experiences of inter-personal violence highlighted above, including police brutality or gender based violence. Nonetheless, when asked directly in subsequent discussions, priorities for peace for these young people reflected their experiences of constraint and included “easing tension between families, societies and communities” (int. 24), “doing business peacefully” (int. 117), or as one group discussion of rural youth identified: “Only if we get true peace, the mountain will remain, we can do farming freely, and we can travel peacefully” and “peace means having the right to attend schools freely, go around freely, sell the things freely, farm freely” (int. 68). Peace was therefore related to the ability to enact personal priorities.

Access to, Experiences and Perceptions of Formal Education
The presentation of the issues above identified by young people as constraining their opportunities for action provides a backdrop within which to situate the current and potential roles of education as affecting youth agency. This section provides a more detailed discussion of engagement with and experiences relating to formal education as articulated by both education professionals and young people participating in the research. Particular attention is paid to the gendered dimensions of learning experiences as well as the lack of encounter with the formal, secondary education system. While it is recognised that the proposed education reforms seek to strengthen the capacity of education structures and improve learning experiences for future students, the issues raised here reveal the impacts of previous
and existing education practices on young adults who have been affected by these experiences.

**Accessibility & Absenteeism**
The high level of absence and attrition from formal schooling amongst Myanmar’s youth - otherwise known as a high school dropout rate - was perceived by many informants to be a major societal challenge in Myanmar. Indeed, it was referred to by one informant from an aid organisation as “potentially a social bomb” (int. 6), because of its role in jeopardising the prospects of the country’s large youth demographic. This drop out of youth from schooling occurs at different stages and for different reasons, but is most pronounced at the early secondary level (Department of Population 2017). This was perceived by respondents to result in a large youth population that is unskilled and unprepared for labour market opportunities, as well as lacking recognised, formal educational qualifications.

Youth absenteeism was largely understood as a product of family poverty and financial pressures. The high costs of education prevented families, especially migrant workers, from sending their children to school (int. 31). Moreover, family pressures for youth to contribute to the family income by taking up low paid work or farming in rural areas also explained youth in-attendance. As one teacher working with out of school children and youth explained:

> The first priority is money, so the children can’t go to school because it is their working time. If they come to school they have no money, so their parents don’t like to send the children to school. (int. 15)

Within conditions of extreme precarity, where daily survival was the foremost challenge, the potential benefits of education for youth personal development were devalued and dismissed by many parents. As one informant put it:

> The most important thing is money and their family survival... for the villagers the financial is first and education is second ... they don’t want to be poor so they will do anything. (int. 6)

In addition to economic explanations, lack of schools and teachers in rural areas and a general perception of inadequate educational provision was perceived to contribute to a lack of commitment amongst youth and their parents to education, resulting in high levels of absenteeism. One young woman in rural Mon State noted that “even the headmaster has to teach because of a teacher shortage” (int. 69). Moreover, long journeys to school, as well as security issues caused by a military presence in some areas, also rendered many youth disinclined to attend (int. 2). Such factors are also likely to particularly affect girls’ attendance, as well as a lack of suitable options for girls to participate in schooling in remote areas (int. 23), with parents being more hesitant to send daughters on long journeys to school from remote areas:

> if there isn’t a middle school in their village then they’ve got to go far and particularly for girls families don’t like that. For any child it’s tough, [but] particularly for girls,
[parents are] uncomfortable with girls’ travelling very far or having to go to another village. (int. 4)
The risks of undertaking journeys for school are magnified in conflict areas, with one community education practitioner reflecting on the impact of militarisation on children that often goes unacknowledged:

Another thing is if there is military in the areas, they feel it's not safe to go to school.
For girls, many incidents, a lot of big experiences, unwritten stories, so they disappear in the air. (int. 22)
While it appears that in many areas enrolment rates for girls in school are reasonably high and that there is roughly gender parity in access to education (UNCEF 2012; Department of Population 2015; Department of Population 2017), there continues to be a lack of accurate data from within schools to verify that this is actually the case in the classroom, as data collected on the basis of registration lists does not always reflect consistent participation in school. Regional variations are apparent in the data that does exist, with higher rates of enrolment for girls in some areas in the east compared with lower rates in the west (MoE 2013; Department of Population 2017). Where variations in participation are identified, the causes of school drop-out by boys or girls are also often under-researched. One international education practitioner consulted highlighted these gendered variations:

We see different patterns in different parts of the country, so [in] some of the more traditional communities or some of the remote or ethnic communities it may be the boys who are brought out of school because they’re needed to work or they’re needed [for] the family income; in others it may be the girls because for social reasons or because the boys are considered more likely to be breadwinners, so the reasons vary. (int. 4)

A community education teacher working to support girls’ access to education also identified cultural barriers and expectations that restrict education opportunities for girls:

in the house, some parents think girls don’t need education much, [because] they will be getting married one day and the husband will take care of the girls, so they think they don’t want to invest in the girls’ education. (int. 23)
Additionally, female students themselves identified factors including the lack of adequate WASH facilities in schools and having experienced body shaming especially during menstruation (ints. 23, 24 and 88) as contributing to their reluctance to attend school consistently. For example, one former student from Ayewaddy division recounted having missed school for several weeks after being shamed for having stained her longyi while menstruating and being too embarrassed to return to school (int. 125).

For those likely to be marginalised within society, education experiences were characterised as difficult at best. Disabled youth highlighted their frustration that “most of children with disabilities in Myanmar have been still losing their right to access education as others” (int. 116). Challenges experienced in attending school included:

There are many inaccessible places and infrastructures for children with disabilities in mainstream schools in [the outskirts of Yangon]. They are muddy or unlevelled paths, classroom entrances, inaccessible toilets and classroom infrastructures. (int. 116)
During the same group discussion, teachers admitted their lack of knowledge and resources to adequately cater for disabled students which was driving young people with disabilities away from education:

Almost all teachers in mainstream schools don’t know how to teach children with disabilities. [Having] no knowledge about how to teach children with disabilities causes then not to be accepted in schools and become out of school. (int. 116)

As also highlighted below, there is an evident collective frustration for young people at a formal education system that they felt had not adequately served them and in many cases actively discriminated against them.

Relevance of Learning

The lack of relevance of the content of the formal school curriculum to youth economic, social and political aspirations was cited as a key cause of youth disaffection and alienation from current educational provision both amongst youth as well as national and international actors. Many informants critiqued a systemic failure of curriculum provision to respond to the needs of youth within their diverse contexts and situations and daily realities. Thus it was noted that:

What is said in the textbooks and what the children are hearing and also observing in the outside world are quite different. This has a negative impact or influence on the children. (int. 4)

During a group discussion with youth respondents from Mon State, one young man commented that “we need education that fits with the reality... Education should help with solving the problems you face now” (int. 57). Youth also critiqued the lack of attention to civic and political education as well as opportunities to develop critical thinking skill (ints. 38 and 57) as undermining their capacity to exercise control over their lives. “If they teach the children to think, they will think about their lives” explained another young woman during the same group discussion (int. 57). Faced with abuses of power, “we will think and know that it is because of some people who are using the authority in the wrong way” (int. 57). Such comments underline the strength of youth feeling about the weaknesses of current curricula provision in undermining their agency across many dimensions of their lives.

There was also a general perception that the curriculum was not preparing youth with relevant skills, knowledges and competencies to enter into labour markets and lacked practical relevance to their economic aspirations (ints. 9, 6, 23, 38, 54, 57 and 117). As one informant noted with despair, “what they have learned in school is no use to them... 11 years in schooling for nothing” (int. 6). Lack of career guidance, relevant agricultural knowledge and more general life-skills support for youth were cited as particularly being absent within a system geared to rote learning for the final matriculation exam (int. 23). In relation to the perceived lack of links between education and the labour market, there was agreement on the importance of offering youth better and targeted vocational education, linked to labour market needs (int. 17, 86 and 119). The failure of the education system to valorise work related learning and to provide youth with qualifications linked to Myanmar’s developing labour markets was perceived as a significant weakness, undermining youth capacity to exploit the benefits of increased foreign investment.
Learning history in government schools in Mon State

In a series of discussion groups undertaken in Mon State with current and former students, frustrations were reported with learning history in government schools. In particular, reinforcing findings discussed elsewhere in the chapter, they highlighted didactic, lecture-based approaches in which they were expected to take notes and memorise information. These experiences left no opportunities for them to ask questions, or to express their viewpoints, leaving many bored and uninterested (int. 54 and 55). As one young woman put it, “the teacher needs to teach interestingly and give chance to ask questions of the students” (int. 91). Such comments point to a disconnection between youth experiences of historical learning outside of school as emergent from community-based interaction and as encountered within the formal classroom through authoritarian pedagogical practices. Indeed, youth associated learning history through teacher-centred transmission of historical information with coercive student-teacher relationships resulting from the exercise of corporal punishment (int. 54 and 55).

The ethnic Mon students also expressed resentment at the selective content of the school history, which they perceived to be Bamar dominated and lacking recognition of or incorporation of the history of their ethnic group. This confirms recent research that has concluded that “space in school curricula for history other than that of the Burmese nation state is narrow” (McCormick 2014, 323). Youth perception of an exclusive historical narrative was understood as a mismatch between the content of government school history textbooks and the insights they had derived from their families. So one young man commented: “One very interesting thing to me is that Mon history was written by the Burmese government and its very different story or information from what my grandfather told me” (int. 71). These youth experienced this perceived manipulation of historical content by the state as a conspiracy to belittle their ethnic identity and historical memories and therefore as source of alienation, mistrust and conflict. In particular, this group of Mon students expressed a sense that such exclusions amounted to a failure to recognize the painful experiences suffered by their ethnic community at the hands of the Bamar (int. 71). In linking their investment in the subject with recognition of the distinctive experiences of their ethnic identity understood as under threat, these youth viewpoints reflect those held more broadly among Mon local historians as shown in the recent work of McCormick (2014).

Additionally, the students critiqued the dominance in the current curriculum of “wars and fighting” (int. 54), which they perceived as legitimising violence and warfare, and called for more relevant subject content oriented to their daily realities, interests and concerns. They wanted a greater focus on Myanmar’s post-independence era as well as social and cultural history, which dealt with agriculture, religion and the history of science (int. 39 and 54). Finally, the students saw the potential of the subject to impact their own and other’s peacebuilding behaviours through offering a reservoir of examples of exemplary ethical behaviours which they could refer to and imitate (int. 54).

Additionally, the lack of sex education in state schools was also identified as failing to prepare young men and women for relationships which was perceived as exacerbating gender inequalities (ints. 23, 24 and 88). Young urban women interviewed particularly highlighted issues of sexual and reproductive health, abortion and trafficking as areas of concern for them, but which are entirely absent from formal school curricula (ints. 23, 24, 52 and 125). Other women in urban areas talked of the social hostility to their education and the paradox of obtaining qualifications (int. 114). While it is a mark of prestige and pride for the family for a daughter to receive a degree, actively using that education beyond clearly defined social roles is often not encouraged. Additionally, for many university courses, entrance grade requirements differ for men and women, with women requiring a higher grade than men to
access courses including medicine and engineering. For some courses this has been justified as a quota system to encourage male enrolment (Maber 2014, 147), however it reinforces institutionalised gender inequalities, the association of certain subjects as more suitable for certain genders and perpetuates a climate of male privilege, as illustrated by one young man in a group discussion expressing: “Men are better than girls. In the matriculation exam boys can attend good schools with lower marks than girls” (int. 38).

Language of Instruction
Several youth respondents, particularly those in Mon State, emphasized that the lack of mother tongue instruction and the use of Burmese language as the only medium of instruction in state schools was leading to learning difficulties and educational underachievement of non-Bamar ethnic youth. This took the form of inability in the early years of schooling to understand lessons taught in an unfamiliar Burmese language, and a recourse therefore by ethnic groups in government schools to rote learning rather than meaningful comprehension (ints. 29, 41, 44, 52 and 59). This initial inability to access the curriculum was deemed to result in subsequent underperformance in exams and in learning more broadly. One Pa-Oh youth explained:

The challenge in the school is that we can’t understand the lessons and can’t catch all the information very well because of the language barrier. We don’t get equal opportunities like others [who speak] Burmese. (int. 35)

Teachers similarly reported how ethnic minority children are “struggling to understand the lessons and taking more time studying than Burmese [Bamar] children” (int. 74). Others noted that being in a classroom for ethnic minority youth amounted to “studying in a foreign country” (int. 13). These observations on the linguistic impediments to learning faced by ethnic minority youth have been supported by in country research by the Nyein foundation and research into early grade reading abilities (Nyein Foundation 2012; Lo Bianco 2015, 13).

Youth participants in the research also perceived language-linked educational disadvantages to result in exclusions from broader economic and social opportunities for their empowerment and well-being. In this sense, the failure to maximize the educational opportunities of ethnic minority youth through addressing their linguistic disadvantage was for many symptomatic of structural economic and social inequities experienced by their ethnic community. Related by several informants to a broader issue of unequal (re)distribution in educational provision, the particular issue of language of instruction opened up into a broader critique of a centralized education system skewed in favour of securing the achievement of the dominant Bamar language groups. Articulating this perceived underlying inequity, a deputy education officer of the Karen Language Association pointed out that “when the children go to school, it is kind of less opportunity than others” (int. 37).

Finally, some youth were explicit on the potential of language of instruction reform to enhance peacebuilding dynamics within Myanmar through addressing what was perceived as a failure of cultural recognition that generated feelings of alienation and therefore conflict. One Pa-Oh youth pointed out that:
We felt that we are forced to learn Burmese language.... So we feel angry and feel that we don't get full rights... if all ethnics are able to learn their own language, they will feel more confident and happier... so in my opinion it links to peacebuilding. (int. 35)

Youth saw multi-lingualism as a potential opportunity for improvement of their social, political and economic empowerment. A trilingual vision of complementary language acquisition was succinctly expressed by one Pa-Oh youth who pointed out that “youth should learn Pa-Oh language first, Myanmar [Burmese] second and English third” (int. 68). This linguistic repertoire was perceived to extend the possibilities for youth to communicate with different groups both national and international. In this way multiple language skills were deemed to play a pivotal role in expanding the social networks of communication and socialization for youth, therefore playing both an enabling and empowering role. The benefits of learning English as an international language which might facilitate access to information and communication outside of the country were also widely recognised (ints. 40 and 73). This finding confirms McCormick’s (2014) conclusions about the reputation of English language use as a tool of empowerment and, indirectly of cultural validation amongst Mon communities. It also reflects youth concern to capitalize on the recent opening up of Myanmar to greater contact with the international community (ints. 57 and 73).

**Pedagogy and Gendered Learning**

Negative experiences of the curriculum were also linked to critiques of pedagogical practices which several of the youth respondents experienced as alienating. Youth pointed in particular to the dominance of rote learning methods within authoritarian instructional techniques and an exam-dominated approach to learning. One young man noted that “we are afraid of the teachers at the schools and the teachers lecture and we memorise it” (int. 38). Moreover, some youth regretted what they saw as poor relationships between teachers and students such that they felt “unable to speak freely in the classroom” (int. 57). The inability to ask teachers questions was perceived as a particular hindrance to their learning about civic and political issues (int. 57), as well as for ethnic minority students and students with visual or hearing impairments who expressed frustration at not being able to ask for clarification or assistance (ints. 116, 125 and 126).

Authoritarian practices within the classroom are seen to reproduce hierarchies of subordination and gender inequalities, a disadvantage particularly experienced by women and girls in contemporary Myanmar society (Maber & Han 2018). Even though teachers themselves may be women, the prominence of rote learning and the suppression of critical thinking skills in teaching practices has the gendered effect of not preparing girls to challenge the social inequalities which they face (Maber 2014, 146-7). This was also articulated by participants in the research as limiting girls’ and women’s opportunities to be prepared to access positions of leadership and take action against subordination (ints. 23, 53 and 57). One community teacher explained that schools were not doing enough to support girls to overcome these cultural expectations, also pointing to the intersections of disadvantage experienced by ethnic minority students:

For the boys, they are coping [with] the difficulties, but for the girls, due to the culture, they are stopped in speaking out... So in school, they can’t speak out. They are afraid
that they become wrong. [And] the ethnic girls are facing the language barrier. (int. 23)

The same educator continued to highlight further ways that practices in the classroom are replicating cultural assumptions about gender and failing to prepare women to lead:

Another thing is that they don't have a chance to be a classroom leader, group leader, because we don't have girl leaders in the school. Very few schools have girl leaders. From the girls' point in education, they don't know how to work with other people and how to lead others. If they lead, they don't know how to make decisions. Another point is sexual part – in the classroom, the girls are facing sexual abuse by the boys verbally or non-verbally. (int. 23)

The absence of a space for critical reflexivity within pedagogical practices also denies boys the opportunity to interrogate the patriarchal norms and assumptions which may frame their masculinity. Likewise, curriculum material that is dominated by representations of military men not only fail to provide girls with models of leadership, but also glorify and reinforce dominant associations of masculinity and violence for boys. As one community educator highlighted:

In education, in our school curriculum, in history, Myanmar history, we have many women leaders, they don't put the women leaders in the curriculum. And also in history, it's really violent, so which king is how to fight to the enemy, how to do, how to revenge, so they don't put about how to negotiate. If they negotiate, which kings give their daughter to which kings. (int. 23)

As also reflected in the quote above, the intersections of gender and violence were commonly encountered. These intersections also combined with other experiences of disadvantage or discrimination including age, ethnicity, linguistic and cultural identity, socio-economic position, disability and sexual orientation, so that members of the LGBT community, disabled women and HIV positive youth were more frequently raising experiences of gender-based violence within education (ints. 24, 67, 88, 116 and 126).

Previous experiences in formal education have therefore frequently been problematic for young people and compounded a sense that the state education system has not been adequately supporting and preparing all youth for their futures. However, beyond the formal sector, a variety of non-formal learning initiatives aim to provide a counter-point to formal education practices and offer alternative spaces of learning. While such non-formal initiatives can vary widely in their scope and aims, below we draw attention to three case studies that prioritised varying dimensions of youth agency, including social, cultural and economic.

**Non-formal Education Initiatives for Youth**

During the course of the research undertaken between January and April 2015, the research team studied several non-formal education initiatives working with youth in Yangon Division and Mon State. The intention was not to set up an opposition between formal and non-formal education practices, but rather to uncover examples of initiatives that sought to support and advance differing dimensions of youth agency and explore their varying approaches to doing so. In line with our methodological approach outlined in Chapter 2, we aimed to maintain a balance between cultural (social), political and economic initiatives (CPE). Three of these case-studies of non-formal youth initiatives are presented here: the Human Drama Forum Theatre,
based in Shwe Pyi Thar, Yangon Division; the Pa-Oh Youth Cultural and Literacy Society based in Mon State; and the Centre for Vocational Training in downtown Yangon.

Our analysis of how each intervention enhanced youth agency draws on interviews with youth participants and (youth or non-youth) staff of these initiatives. In each specific subsection that discusses one of the three cases, we focus firstly on the objectives and theories of change that underlies the design of the initiatives. We explore how and to what extent the initiatives take account of and address the particular contexts that shape and constrain youth possibilities for action. In doing so, we clarify the underlying assumptions of the initiatives about how best to impact and enhance youth agency – essentially teasing out their context-specific and constituency-specific theories of change. Of particular importance also is the extent to which the operation of initiatives themselves were constrained by the uncertain dynamics of Myanmar’s transition during 2015. Secondly, we identify the processes through which the intervention impacts youth behaviours, attitudes, knowledges and skills. Thirdly, we reflect on participant’s perceptions of the initiatives, noting how they understand its impact and benefits as well as the ongoing challenges they face. While mindful that youth agency may be broken down into various yet interconnected dimensions – political, economic, social and cultural – the analysis aims not to impose such categories on our findings too strongly. On the contrary, we are keen to respect and uncover the holistic ways in which youth horizons of action as well as constraints are frequently experienced within their day to day realities.

**The Human Drama Forum Theatre**
The Human Drama Forum Theatre is a peer led drama group based in Shwe Pyi Thar that is supported by FXB (François-Xavier Bagnond organisation) and the British Council, with initial training provided by Pan Intercultural Arts. FXB works with people living with HIV to support health awareness, and provide livelihood opportunities through vocational skills training and work in their product making and shop. The theatre group of twelve youth performers and two theatre troupe managers, working in the same location, are all young and marginalized in multiple ways. Many have dropped out of school for various reasons including family poverty and experiences of violence. Using a collaborative approach participants write and perform role plays and sketches in participation with community members in marginalized community areas. The group have been performing for 4 years and in this time have accomplished over 300 performances across the country as well as cascading their techniques to over 220 social and community activists. This study draws on data derived from interviews and group discussions with 2 support staff, 3 youth trainers and 10 youth participants (3 male and 7 female).

The Human Drama Forum Theatre mobilises several approaches to effecting changes in the skills, attitudes and overall wellbeing of participants. Central to the ethos of the group is the close collaboration with communities. The group work with a given community, mostly in the industrial outskirts of Yangon but also across the country in Kachin, Mon, Kayin and Thaninthayi, to get to know the social issues that are concerning them. These have commonly included domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, drug use, human trafficking and sexual assault. They then spend a few weeks preparing a drama performance that will help share awareness and strategies to address these issues within the communities. During the drama performances,
youth facilitators encourage the community audience members to participate and interact with the performance, in order to build greater connection with what is being shared. For example, when presented with a dramatized ‘worst case scenario’ audience members might be asked to indicate how the script can be rewritten to avoid these outcomes. As one facilitator reflected, “the essence of Forum Theatre is encouraging the audience to participate in the theatrical performances to let them voice out and get involved actively” (int. 24). Audience sizes tend to be of at least 50 community members across a range of ages. An additional success of the performances has been their ability to engage those who are most marginalised, particularly women, to share issues that are traditionally kept private, such as reproductive health, domestic abuse, sexual assault and child rape. Although both men and women participate in the performances, women have tended to outnumber men as audience members, adding to an environment in which individuals feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences.

By working in a creative and participatory medium, the group engages with community members who may be less enthusiastic about more traditional education means. By taking on this role of educator the young drama participants are placed in a position of leadership which is evidently valuable for their own self-confidence. Drawing on the power of drama to catalyse discussion, the project positions young people in leadership roles as agents of awareness raising on issues which are not often talked about in their communities. Consequently, youth participants aim to “facilitate the audience in the community to speak up [about] their feelings and find ways to solve their problems through dramas” (int. 24). Through managing such collaborative and inter-generational reflection they could also become agents of behavioural and attitudinal changes. For instance, one trainer noted that:

When some audience realize the effects of their bad behaviours, they even come and promise the drama group members that they would stop doing those bad things like drinking alcohol and so on. (int. 24)

Verifying the longevity of the behavioural change that might accompany such promises is challenging, however wherever possible the group maintain contact and return to the communities for follow-up visits, recounting that it is “satisfying to see the reduction in discrimination in the community after their performance” (int. 24). Supporting such follow-up activities would be a potentially promising space for more sustainable change in communities. Likewise, the youth trainers explained: “we also give training to some people in the community so that they can run forum theatre performances on their own in their community” (int. 24). Sustaining such multiplying initiatives has the possibility both to expand the reach and impact of the performances and could also support the development of the youth performers to take on further training responsibility.

Involvement in the writing and production of drama also provides an opportunity for young people to gain confidence as performers in public spaces as well as developing a range of social and communication skills. Peer trainers also underscored this satisfaction and sense of achievement “upon finishing the training and being able to participate in the performances” (int. 24). Connecting to the enhancement of youth agency, a feature of this programme is how it manages to turn young people’s negative experiences in life including disadvantage, discrimination, and violence, into sources of transformative reflections and
actions. When discussing their personal experiences through participating in the group, participants confided:

I’m proud of being able to perform dramas about HIV” and “I feel pleased with being able to perform at the places where the people lack health education/ knowledge. (int. 24)

The project also supports youth to build on the social and communication skills developed through their involvement in drama productions by participating in youth forums which provide a related space for advocacy in relation to similar issues. Peer education and knowledge dissemination on the topics addressed by the dramas are also encouraged. Such collective and collaborative reflection by youth more broadly on social and economic issues which they prioritise are recognised by project participants as an important source of inspiration and empowerment. As one peer trainer put it, “it’s good to have forums among the youths. As we get to know more about other forums and organisations, we decide to work harder” (int. 24). While currently small scale and community based, the Forum Theatre hopes to scale up its activities on a more national level and also to work with other youth organisations. Focus for the coming years is also given to raising understanding of the rule of law and the changing legal environment as the country looks beyond elections. One key constraint on such activities is the need to seek permission from authorities before each performance process can begin. However, one youth trainer commented: “we want the participation of the authority in our Human Drama group” (int. 24), suggesting greater collaboration as the route forward to opening up further activities.

Pa-Oh Youth Cultural and Literacy Society
The Pa-Oh Youth Cultural and Literacy Society engages youth in educational and advocacy activities in relation to the preservation of one of Myanmar’s ethnic languages and cultural traditions. The group works with youth from the Pa-Oh communities living in rural Mon State and is managed and supported by community elders. This study is based on interviews with the (youth) Chairman and Secretary of the Club, as well as focus group discussions, involving 11 youth participants (3 female and 8 male).

Underpinning the commitment of ethnic minority youth to the cultural activities organised by the association was a sense of the centrality of culture – language, literature and traditions – to their identity and self-definition and to the distinctiveness of their ethnic group. So one youth summarised the vision of the group in declaring that: “everyone should value their own culture” (int. 68). Comments such as “literature is the life of each ethnic group” and “literacy is the heart of the people… if we do not know our language, we will be lost” (int. 68) confirm their passionate commitment to the mission of the club. The youth club’s appreciation of what they could learn from the group’s cultural activities was also linked to a sense that they could function as agents of inter-generational cultural preservation and transmission, as one participant highlighted: “We want to pass down our culture from generation to generation” (int. 68). This was evident in their recognition that without their knowledge of their cultural traditions gained through their participation in the group, they would be unable to contribute to such endeavours, with the consequence that their particular culture may be destroyed (int. 68). One youth leader pointed out that “if we lose our language and culture it will be like losing our tribe” (int. 68). Involvement in such activities within the
association thus symbolised for youth their participation in a larger project of cultural protection and renewal (int. 68).

The willingness of youth to invest so enthusiastically in the club’s cultural activities – as a key dimension of their self-definition and expression – was driven by their perception of being situated within a particular socio-political context. On the one hand, in participating in such activities at all they recognised that they were enjoying a space of freedom unavailable during military junta rule; the youth leader of the club pointed out that attempts under the former regime to celebrate their ethnic day had resulted in arrest and imprisonment (int. 35). However their motivation for involvement in the club’s vision was articulated as a response to a perceived lack of state recognition for their ethnic group, such that the pursuit of cultural activities were a means of self-valorisation. The sense of a culture and ethnicity under siege articulated by these youth was based on a fear and resentment at the prospect of cultural assimilation into Bamar majority customs and language. So the leader of the club explained:

We want to preserve freely our literacy and culture, but we have no right to do it, so our ethnics feel angry and dissatisfied. From these problems, conflict can be caused. (int. 35)

Additionally, the youth club participants articulated their commitment to culture in relation to other pressing educational issues of inequality and injustice, including a lack of teachers that carry their customs and language in schools. They also mentioned how they feel forced to learn in languages other than their mother tongue (int. 68). In these ways, the youth’s concern for cultural recognition intersected with a claim for a fair redistribution of educational resources, including adequate teachers, relevant curricula and language of instruction. This sense of unequal distribution of resources was connected to a broader concern to redress economic and political inequalities.

Hence, investment in cultural pride was also linked with political and socio-economic aspirations. In focus group discussions the youth linked cultural activities to the process of “upgrading the living standards of our own ethnic people” (int. 68). Work and livelihood opportunities were identified as urgently needed. As expressed by one youth participant as an invitation to both government and international actors:

We would like the NGOs and organisations that work for development projects please do not leave us because we need support for health and transportation because we are behind others. (int. 68)

Moreover, the self-confidence provided by cultural recognition and awareness was also linked to aspirations to greater political representation and to equip youth to participate in the new democratic openings. One youth pointed out that:

Now as we have democracy we need to be able to walk in[to] democratic parliament, only if we have representative[s] in parliament we can talk about our development and dangers upon us. (int. 68)

The club was perceived to also serve as a training ground for youth to learn about the political systems with a view to representing their ethnicity in the 2015 elections. Those elections have ultimately offered a sense of greater hope and opportunity for the Pa-Oh community as a Pa-Oh minister was inaugurated in 2016 who is viewed as active in support of improved education.
While the youth seemed to be aware that these beliefs can lead to sectarianism and intolerance, participants and (youth-led) staff of the club considered that knowledge of and pride in their own culture would strengthen their capacity for respect and tolerance of other ethnic groups, thereby contributing to peaceful coexistence and co-operation with other groups in society. They offered the logic that they needed to enjoy the self-esteem that awareness of their own cultural traditions would give them as the basis for respect for other groups. Thus the view was expressed that “we will improve our own ethnic groups and also stay peacefully with other ethnic groups” while avoiding becoming “narrow-minded” (int. 68). Indeed, an elderly community member who reflected on the work of the club, coming from the same ethnic background, confirmed that the club’s strategy to strengthen cultural recognition was seen as “a way to negotiate with the government without fighting” (int. 68). The club expressed an interest in harnessing social media as well as radio to further their cause, but ran into practical constraints of a lack of online connectivity, especially in rural areas.

From a position of marginalisation, the struggle for recognition (representation and redistribution) of this ethnic youth club connects to a broader argument made in other contexts, such as the education reform for intra-and intercultural education in Bolivia (Lopes Cardozo 2011; 2013). On the other hand, the literature also points to potential warning signs of strong identification processes arising from a position of alienation, isolation, fear and humiliation, which according to Davies (2008) this can in some cases lead to forms of radicalisation and ‘othering’, rather than a fostering of social cohesion. We view the youth in this club as being positioned in between a sense of solidarity with their elders, while at the same time expressing a wish to foster inter-ethnic understanding and mutuality in these changing and rather volatile times for the country.

Centre for Vocational Training (CVT)
The Centre for Vocational Training (CVT) works with young apprentices and companies in and around Yangon to provide training and support to young people in the workplace as well as also providing training to the hosting companies. Apprenticeships and vocational training courses offered cover five professions: furniture maker, metal worker, hotel and gastronomy assistant, commercial assistant, and electrician. While some international volunteers contribute their time to support the training and expertise of the centre, the organisation is largely staffed and managed by local trainers, managers and administrators. This study is based on interviews with 2 organisation directors and teachers, a focus group discussion with 6 alumni (3 male and 3 female), informal discussions with students and graduates and participation in events associated with the organisation.

CVT takes an integrated approach to vocational training, seeing skills development as necessarily parallel to the needs of industrial and professional sectors. Drawing from a model of European vocational training to offer professional development through apprenticeships, they differ significantly from more transient approaches to skills training by developing sustained relationships with participating companies, with one of the managerial staff outlining: “This education is a close co-operation with team work with companies and school” (int. 17). In contrast to some more ad hoc approaches to vocational training, the organisation prioritises building relationships with industry, businesses and with Ministries, including the
Ministry of Labour, of Forestry and of Social Welfare, to improve working conditions for young people. The organisation therefore works in close collaboration with host companies and business to improve health and safety standards and contract arrangements (int. 119). Opportunities for young people’s employment are seen as closely linked to Myanmar’s transition, and therefore skills are aimed towards both versatile and expanding sectors including hospitality and electrical engineering. Responding to a shift in orientation amongst young workers, the aim is to position young people to benefit from the changes in Myanmar, which include more building and construction work, expansion of the hotel and tourist industry and increased international business. However, the organisation also aims to position young people not only to develop their skills to participate in the labour force, but also to participate more broadly in Myanmar’s economic, social and political transition, as one manager underlined:

Seven years ago, the students wanted to go to other countries. Now they are not very [keen] to go to other countries, but they want to get a good place, good salary [here]. [It’s] slowly changing…Our objective is not only just a skilled labour but also to make them young leaders. (int. 17)

CVT accepts young apprentices to its professional courses, which last 3 years: “usually our category is middle school dropouts, high school dropouts within the age of 17 to 22” (int. 17). Vocational training was seen as a means of providing an alternative pathway for young people who have not always benefited from formal schooling environments: “So I’m sure although they do not pass the middle school or high school, if they have a chance to learn, they also can develop” (int. 17). In this way staff also acknowledged the need for different methods of learning to be available to youth:

Some young people, instead of learning a lot of academic [subjects], they prefer to start working. We do not have a very good career counselling centre and program and approach in Myanmar. So sometimes young people are not sure where their interests are. (int. 17)

The professionalism of the organisations has contributed to its own reputation, in turn raising the reputation of its graduates. Professionally, the impact for students of training with the organisation was clear. Graduates reported being promoted and receiving an increase in salary, for some up to 80% (ints. 117 and 118). Likewise, the alumni interviewed were unanimous in attributing their subsequent professional success to their participation in the organisation. One young woman graduate of the Hotel and Gastronomy Assistance programme highlighted her career progression and further ambitions:

I started my career as a waitress before joining Hotel and Gastronomy Assistance Class. I was promoted to bartender as soon as I joined CVT. I became a bar supervisor while I was a second year student. I want to be a General Manager at a five star hotel and I am still trying to get there. (int. 117)

Graduates also highlighted the inter-personal skills that they had developed during their studies and apprenticeships. These had benefitted their working practices recounting that they now had “better interpersonal skills”, “improved communication skills” and were “more understanding to others and the nature of their jobs and responsibilities” (int. 117). However, at a more personal level these were also associated with improved well-being for the youth, who identified having “become more conscientious”, “become more mature”, “[made] more
friends” and having “more confidence” (int. 117) through their engagement with the organisation.

For some, professional success had brought them “less worries” (int. 117). However, several alumni also highlighted the pressures they faced as young people trying to balance work and study commitments with family responsibilities and caring roles. Being unable to take a regular day off in some cases contributed to declining relationships or was associated with depression and health problems as a result of having “no personal time and family time” (int. 117). Others also highlighted the multiplication of pressures for less privileged youth, who had to travel long distances on public transport from their homes on the outskirts of the city to their work and study sites (int. 118). The prioritisation of professional obligations over well-being illustrates the personal dedication of these individual youth and also reflects the challenges many young people in our research articulated of balancing the competing demands on their time.

Conclusions
The issues highlighted by young men and women in the research revealed a diversity of priorities for individuals in being able to exercise their agency, and also indicated the central role that education is perceived as playing. Experiences within formal learning environments have therefore galvanized a dual characterization of education as simultaneously having contributed to young people’s disempowerment while also being identified as potentially offering opportunity to improve their circumstances. The legacies of neglect and co-optation of the formal education sector to serve the agendas of the military governments have resulted in many young people’s prior experiences of schooling being frequently negative and exclusionary, which has been exacerbated for socially marginalised groups including young women, ethnic and religious minorities and those with disabilities. These negative experiences were also presented as not only disempowering in the moment, but also subsequently through the denial of educational advancement, skills and opportunities for secure employment. Informed by these experiences, youth respondents continued to place emphasis on their desire to see advancements in the formal education sector and the contribution that greater inclusivity and improvements in educational practices could make to their agency and empowerment.

As a counterpoint, this chapter has presented three case studies of non-formal education initiatives that are offering alternative approaches to learning. These three initiatives engaged youth in a variety of ways through both peer learning and structured hierarchies and included drama, cultural and language activities, and vocational training. While non-formal initiatives may take varied forms motivated by diverse agendas, a strength of the selected initiatives was their connection with the daily realities and political, social, economic and cultural challenges experienced by young people. Varying degrees of political will and resource commitment, together with the legacies of a restrictive political economy context continue to pose challenges for such non-formal initiatives. However, the case studies indicate examples of ways in which programmes may draw on the pre-existing indigenous initiatives of young people and those that encourage inter-group peer networking, as well as opportunities to reformulate structured learning environments, with the intention of building
the agency and empowerment of young people to contribute to improvements in their communities as well as their immediate circumstances.

References


