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

Chapter 11 – Youth Experiences of Non-formal Education for Peacebuilding

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Abstract

The intersection of peace and conflict studies with studies on education provides a wealth of research opportunities, around youth, agency, inclusion and more. The two case studies outlined in this chapter focus on non-formal education initiatives in Yangon, Myanmar. The first case study focuses on a political training institution, and how it influences youth experiences of their agency, before the transition to democracy in 2016. The second case study investigates how a school delivers ethnically-inclusive education for peacebuilding, in a movement for social change. Reflecting the particularities of Myanmar’s social, political and cultural characteristics, the conclusions of this chapter highlight that the specific nature of the country’s conflict shapes how peacebuilding and political engagement are understood, delivered and experienced. Both case studies show that education can have unintended outcomes. These findings underscore that more attention must be paid to the process of education in conflict affected contexts, to make sure young people are able to use these opportunities to enhance their agency.

Introduction

In the context of reconstruction and reconciliation that forms Myanmar’s peace process, education has been a key tool to which stakeholders, activists and policymakers look with enthusiasm. They see the possibilities of increasing the skills and knowledge of the youth population, as well as reconciling difference and building stable and peaceful relations in a diverse and often fragmented country. Indeed, there is an unmistakable point at which peace and education intersect, which is central to the nation-building exercise at the heart of the peace process. The case studies presented in this chapter explore this intersection, questioning how young people in Yangon try to engage in peacebuilding and political development projects during this time of transition, by seeking out opportunities to access training and learning in activism, advocacy, critical thinking and leadership skills. The first case study describes a political awareness training, and its influence on growing political agency in young adults, in the run-up to the 2015 elections. The data revealed that, as students participated in the training programmes, they were also adapting and appropriating these skills and knowledge to meet their own desires and intentions, beyond the expectations of the training providers. The second case study centres on a post-secondary programme in a civil society-led school, founded on the importance of ethnic diversity and inclusion in

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producing education of peacebuilding within the Myanmar context. Key findings revealed that the content and teaching style promoted at the school formed a curriculum which is unique in Myanmar, using practice, innovation and a focus on context to engage students with peacebuilding and also development. Simultaneously, some of the methods and materials used in the classroom forged strong links with international practices and systems, leading to questions around their suitability for the Myanmar context.

Through the findings of these case studies, the role of non-formal education systems is analysed, in its role of building young people’s capacities for civic engagement and active roles in the political transitions and attempts to foster peace in Myanmar. The educational programmes are shown to supply critical skills and knowledge, but they also occupy a complex and often contested space in Myanmar’s education landscape, as they are defined in opposition to the generally poor and outdated public education system in the country. This data connects with broader discussions around the various “faces” of education in conflict-affected settings (Bush and Saltarelli 2000), wherein differences in access and content between young people in Myanmar may be seen to have negative repercussions, by creating new divides or conflicts. The research also highlights the significant flexibility with which the young learners embrace and utilise their newly acquired competencies to respond to the complex and evolving context of political development, continued tensions and peacebuilding initiatives in Myanmar, in unexpected and unintended ways. In this way, the non-formal institutions also provide youth with the space to experience and incorporate unfamiliar ideas, which help to shape their perspectives on the context of conflict-to-peace transition, and the roles they could occupy in it. These case studies show that both education programmes that were provided often had unintended outcomes, which highlights the nonlinear nature of schooling.

**Methodology**
Research within the first case study on Myanmar Exitus\(^2\) was conducted between August and December 2014, one year before the election that led to a historic victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD). Myanmar Exitus is a local organisation that has provided political awareness trainings in Yangon from 2006 onwards, and one of the first organisations to teach politics, which was remarkable at a time when discussing political issues was highly sensitive. The training programme and the organisation itself occupied ambiguous positions, due to their affiliations with the military-dominated government. However, they were permitted to operate because they were not deemed to be subversive. In contrast, the field site of the second case study, Kant Kaw Education Centre (KKEC), occupies a more contested space in the field of education services in Myanmar. The school was created and is run by local NGO Thabyay Education Foundation, and offers a uniquely diverse cohort of students a one-year programme in ‘community leadership and social studies’. The school opened in 2009 in Thailand, but has since been able to move to Yangon, as relations between the Government and the civil society sector have evolved. In contrast to Myanmar Exitus, KKEC staff are a mixed group of national (Burmese and ethnic) and international (Southeast Asian and

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\(^2\) All names of individuals and organisations have been altered unless express permission has been granted by them.
staff, which added to the difficulties it faced in establishing itself. Research on the second case study took place between January and April 2016, in the period after the election and before the transfer of power to the new Government. Along with the unpredictable and shifting context, limited timeframes influenced the epistemological standpoints and determined the choice of data collection tools in both research projects. The case-study methodology is based on in-depth research with a relatively small pool of informants, to ensure that its findings are meaningful in the particular circumstances of the research. The value lies not in producing statistically generalizable data, but in generating intimate and holistic insights into the field site, a sort of “snapshot” of a specific time and place, allowing space for a real diversity of thoughts and ideas to be captured.

Both studies used anthropological techniques for data collection and analysis. Drawing from the overall methodological approach of the broader research project, we applied critical ethnography, which is epistemologically linked to critical realism (see Chapter 2 in this book). This allowed us to observe power structures and political purpose that reveal themselves in the study of Myanmar Exitus training. By trying to understand the points of view of participants, and to speak on their behalf – rather than for them – critical ethnographers attempt to use knowledge for social change (Thomas 1992, 3). In both case studies, contextual information and thick descriptions were being used. Also, the thoughts and opinions of the young people were given authority, in order for them to be transforming in conflict. To capture and make sense of the large diversity in research participants at KKEC, a high degree of relativity during analysis was important. A unique approach to this research includes positioning the case study in relation to different paradigms than are usual for many western social scientific studies, such as indigenous and feminist-based perspectives. It was hoped that in this way greater prominence would be given to voices that may often be subdued in mainstream discussions, supporting the case study’s overall focus on inclusion. Mixed methods approaches were taken in both case studies, with a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools used to generate data. These include participant observation, semi- or unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, but also surveys and questionnaires. While both studies are based on relatively small sample sizes (around sixty participants in each), the groups include gender and ethnic diversity. Due to the focus of both case studies on youth experiences, the majority of research participants belonged to the 20 to 30-year-old demographic.

**Conceptual Discussion**

In contexts of conflict, education often plays a central role, with schools varyingly seen as safe spaces for families affected by violence and displacement, or as targets and tools for symbolic or physical attacks against civilians (Davies 2010; Lopes Cardozo 2008; UNESCO 2011). Indeed, far from relegating schooling to a neutral service function, it is important to understand how curricula can be designed with varying degrees of bias or agenda in them. This links to Bush and Saltarelli’s notion of the different “faces” of education (Bush & Saltarelli 2000). In the context of this research topic, the *negative* face corresponds to the promotion of conflict in schooling, through authoritarian teaching styles, physical violence or militarism in the classroom, and the perpetuation of harmful social and political discourses. The *positive* face sees the cultivation of tolerant and respectful attitudes, with an emphasis on critical thinking
and mediation (Hilker 2011; Davies 2005). This ‘positive face’ can be carried into discussion of critical pedagogy, and how education is used for social change. Giroux argues that schooling is “implicated in the construction and organisation of knowledge, desires, values and social practices” through pedagogy’s role in the production of meaning (Jackson 1997). A useful framework for exploring the critical change theory for peacebuilding is Novelli et al’s “4Rs” model (also introduced in Chapter 2 in this book). Expanding on Fraser’s (1998) three Rs – redistribution, recognition and representation – the fourth R is reconciliation, linking social justice theory to contexts of conflict-to-peace transitions. In this framework, the emphasis is on social development as a tool for peacebuilding:

- Political, economic, social and cultural transformation is needed in conflict-affected societies to support positive peace, and to address rather than reproduce or sustain the injustice and inequality that largely drive conflicts. (Novelli et al. 2017, 5)

When applied to the case studies presented in this chapter, the framework helps to understand the ways in which education can be transformative.

The training offered by Myanmar Exitus supports young people to participate in the country’s political sphere, to reveal their individual agency in a complex and shifting context. This is an illustration of the “representation” dimension of the framework, which investigates “the extent to which education policy/reforms involve stakeholders participation”. By supporting the increased inclusion of young people in the political realm, this training increases their political awareness. KKEC’s emphasis on ethnic and diversity and inclusion in the classroom links to the “recognition” dimension, which calls for “recognition of cultural diversity through curriculum” and “citizenship and civic education as a means of state-building”. In addition, elements of KKEC’s curriculum target conflict resolution and nation-building, such as the Peace and Conflict class, which connects with the “reconciliation” dimension by “addressing historic and contemporary economic, political and cultural injustice”, as well as analysing “how education strengthens/weakens social cohesion” (Novelli et al. 2017, 22). At the core of KKEC’s programming is the desire for students to learn about peace and conflict through each other’s experiences, and how they can come together to participate in peacebuilding. Despite the fact that within these case studies the main focus has been on “representation” and “recognition” it remains important to mention that essentially the 4R’s are always interconnected and hence analysed in conjuncture.

As follows from our application of the 4Rs framework, peacebuilding is a core theoretical concept at the heart of these case studies. In both of these, peacebuilding is connected specifically to themes of democracy, citizenship and nation-building. Indeed, conflict in Myanmar is rooted in issues including, but not limited to, self-determination and power-sharing. Considering the astonishing number of ethno-linguistic and religious communities involved in struggles over territory, resources and representation, rebuilding of the nation is a core pillar of the formal peace process. Salem-Gervais and Metro define nation-building as the “process of constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state” (2012, 27). In creating a national identity that corresponds to a defined territory, state structures are put in place which turn individuals into citizens, whose role is dismantling conflict and preventing it in the future. The success of peacebuilding hinges on the success of citizenship work, which is where citizenship education becomes important, in its most critical
and ideal form teaching people to “act politically, to advocate both individually and collectively for themselves and for other marginalised people” (Sleeter 1996, 246). In recent history, Myanmar’s population has accessed only a reduced form of citizenship under military government, making the political encounter, and participation, a key dimension of any citizenship education. Encounter refers to the recognition of political and social diversity in the citizenry, and facilitating relationships between communities, essential in the process of guaranteeing civic rights (Gutmann in Osler & Starkey 2005). Participation sees the number and diversity of individuals and communities expressing themselves politically increasing, which may include previously marginalised or minority groups (Lall & Hla Hla Win 2012).

The training delivered by Myanmar Exitus was designed to build the capacity of young people to participate in the country’s political sphere, albeit with the aim of increasing sympathy for the military-backed USDP Government at the time. However, as is explained below, the research revealed that a significant unintended outcome was that the training facilitated the encounter of many young people from different backgrounds, and with diverse ideas and opinions. This encounter links with the theory outlined above, in which peacebuilding occurs with the coming together of diverse groups and perspectives, within a system of citizenship work through participation in the political sphere. In contrast, KKEC’s programming is designed with peacebuilding as an explicit goal. Diverse groups of young people are brought together to develop skills in active citizenship and conflict resolution, among other fields. KKEC even supplies a particular vision of peacebuilding in the Myanmar context by emphasising locally-informed, bottom-up social development and community engagement as key strategies for the conflict-to-peace transition, further explained below.

The research at KKEC centres on the concept of inclusive education, connected to education discourses around human rights and capabilities, with a broad definition provided by Block et al:

An inclusive learning environment is one that provides a curriculum that caters to a diverse range of students and accommodates diverse voices and perspectives so that all children feel they belong and can contribute. (2014, 1340)

Increased attention to inclusive education in international conventions and treaties (see e.g. UDHR 1948; CRC 1989; UNESCO 2009) underlines the determination of some of the international community to make education open and accessible to a wide range of social groups, and responsive to their needs, from students with disabilities or special needs, to other identity markers, such as cultural background of ethnicity. Research in this field (Sleeter 1996; Osler & Starkey 2005) suggests that this style of education is important, not only for students’ personal growth, but also for “building social cohesion” in a wider context (Taylor & Sidhu 2012, 54) by fostering feelings of belonging within other social groups such as nationality. This is particularly important in contexts with a high rate of cultural or ethnic diversity. Inclusivity in classrooms can be strengthened through attention to issues of voice, representation and justice (Junne & Verkoren 2005; Apple 1990; Sanchez & Rognvik 2012).

In the context of KKEC’s work in Myanmar, this approach to inclusion in the classroom connects to the concept of peace education, or peacebuilding education. A concise definition is missing, although core elements include creating a desire for peace between rivals, building knowledge about conflicts and their contexts, promoting behavioural and attitudinal changes...
toward inclusion, non-violence and conflict resolution, and addressing structures that produce inequality and injustice (Fountain 1999; Bush & Saltarelli 2000; Harris & Synott 2002; Lopes Cardozo 2008; Lopes Cardozo & May 2009; Berghof Foundation 2012). What is critical in the implementation of peacebuilding education is attention to the wider contexts and individual characteristics of conflicts, rather than applying one-size solutions. Ideally, it would form part of a larger process of peacebuilding that goes beyond the classroom, exerting “political influence” into wider social structures (Lopes Cardozo 2008; Berghof Foundation 2012). This amorphous field lacks straightforward agreement around purpose, form and methods, with some critiques levelled against the use of “peace education” as a strategy for pacification, rather than a more constructive or transformative process than is often understood by “peacebuilding education” (see Novelli et al. 2017).

Case Study Myanmar Exitus: Youth Strategies for Enhanced Political Agency

This case study analyzes the influence of political awareness training by an organization called Myanmar Exitus, on the political agency (see chapter 2 for an elaborate definition of political agency) of youth in Yangon. The time of the research was exciting and tense for many, as new elections were planned for November 2015. In countries with a history of military dictatorship, such as Myanmar, there is often limited attention – or space – for political awareness education. After the transition to the USDP Government in 2011 however, there seemed to be increased opportunities for youth in Myanmar to engage in discussions about politics and to explore their rights and duties in relation to their fellow citizens and the state (Matelski 2013, 160). Although the formal education system does not include political education, there were more and more non-formal institutes providing variations of political awareness education. This is confirmed in the second case study below in which the rise of private non-profit schools in Yangon is noted.

In this case study, the multi-scalar relationships between education and youth political agency are analysed, taking into account the strategic, selective context of Myanmar, building on the overall methodology discussed in chapter 2. The research explores the question of how and to what extent the democratic governance training of Myanmar Exitus influences political agency of youth, and how this influences their perceived ability to contribute to the political transitions in the country. Political agency of youth is defined in this study as:

the space for manoeuvre youth have, to develop (un)conscious strategies to influence political decisions and transform social relations that support or hinder the political transitions in their society. (Novelli et al. 2017, see also Chapter 2)

To unravel this “space for manoeuvre”, the concept of agency was broken down into motivations – underlying reasons and interests of youth to participate in the political transitions, and perceptions – the way youth perceive the political situation and their ability to contribute to this, which leads to the development of (un)intended strategies – adopted by youth to participate in politics that hinder or support the transitions, in order to challenge or reproduce the status quo. By critically assessing this concept, the study aimed to increase understanding on if and how education can contribute to a more equitable, peaceful and socially just society (Shah & Lopes Cardozo 2015, 182).
This research showed that young people in Yangon were generally uninterested in participating in the political transition due to a culture of fear. A small group of youth did seem motivated to use the dynamic situation to be engaged in the political field. Their motivation was often related to the fact that they saw a role for themselves in changing the political situation in the country. These young people found ways in which they felt they had an influence, for example as political trainers. During in-depth interviews with students from Myanmar Exitus, they explained that the training motivated them to play a role in the political transitions, and provided them with guidance around ways to participate. This was illustrated by one respondent as an alumnus and trainer noted:

I think Myanmar Exitus at least provides ideas about the political transition, in which the youth can participate. Otherwise youth think ‘we are so afraid, the political field is not related with us’. But Myanmar Exitus changes their mind: ‘The politics [is a field in which] you have to participate.’ That is [the] key point in which Exitus has good successes in Myanmar.

It is interesting that Myanmar Exitus motivated youth to participate in the political transitions and also guided them in doing so, despite their purported aim of preventing youth from challenging the status quo. Providing political awareness education meant there was space created for an unintended outcome, as youth may be trained who will use these skills to challenge the status quo, which would counter their initial objective. This indicates that education is not a linear process, which will be elaborated on below.

The most important findings concerning youth perceptions showed that most respondents were sceptical about the political situation, while they did acknowledge some reform had taken place in recent years. They were often aware of the fact that changes generally benefited a small number of people, leaving the rest of society largely unaffected. Although most youth felt the influence they could have was limited due to age hierarchies and a history of military dictatorship, some were still motivated to make a change in their society. The negative perceptions they had of the political situation, regarding the many forms of injustice, led them to be intrinsically motivated to participate in the transitions. One respondent illustrated this by saying:

I know everything, but I’m only one [person] and I’m a very small. [The government] control everything. I try to learn and I try to break their power. But this needs time. I will try to break the power, little, by little, by little. Trust building [between youth and the government] and then a little grow, little grow, little grow. After that we are the big group and they are the small.

The case study revealed that Myanmar Exitus did try to influence youth perceptions to prevent them from challenging the status quo. However, due to their many varying perceptions, the ways in which these they influenced young people varied. In the sample of this case study, three different archetypes – the independent, the changed and the changers – were established. It is important to note that while these categorizations are useful in guiding the analysis, agency is more complicated in reality, as the strategic spaces for manoeuvre can overlap and co-exist. Therefore, the separation implied by the archetypes does not do justice to the complexity of the positions of youth and might neglect the plurality of their strategies, and changes over time. Youth might move from one archetype to the other, and not all respondents would fit in one of these categories as they often take up
different roles in a variety of times and spaces. Nevertheless, the three archetypes are useful examples to show the different ways in which the perceptions and strategies of youth were influenced by the political awareness training at Myanmar Exitus. The independent are those who had pre-formulated ideas about politics and were motivated to participate in the political field anyway, yet still wanted to join the training for various different reasons. The changed are less familiar with politics. They were most often introduced to the training by family or friends and did not yet have strong political opinions. This group seemed to be motivated to participate in the political transitions through the training. However, they were also easily influenced in their thinking. The changers also did not have much background knowledge about politics upon entering the training. This group seemed to become motivated, although they were generally more reflexive about the information they received than the second archetype. Therefore, they were not easily influenced, and often did not agree with the approach of Myanmar Exitus.

Because of the different perceptions youth held, they also adopted different strategies by making choices about the political field they would work in. Youth made strategic use of contacts in different networks and also moved between these fields. They seemed to do this in order to increase their influence while also ensuring their own survival. Reflecting on the archetypes described above, the independent was seldom influenced by the teaching of Myanmar Exitus and therefore decided for themselves in which political field they wanted to work. The changed tended to work for the government or for government-affiliated organisations, while the changers were generally engaged in civil society organisations and other bodies opposing the Government. The strategies of the changed were perhaps favoured over the other two archetypes, because these fit with the hegemonic culture present in the training programme. For example, one student with connections to the government lived in a very spacious apartment in the city centre of Yangon arranged by his contacts, which he would otherwise not be able to afford. Interestingly, this did not seem to discourage the other archetypes. They looked for other opportunities with, for example, (international) civil society organisations.

Acknowledging that it is difficult to influence decision-making, the research shows that youth did try to find other ways to exercise their agency, for example by being political trainers and teaching the younger generation. Myo, a participant in the research, adopted a myriad of strategies and could belong to the archetype changed, as he would not oppose the Government and would often mention that it was important to understand their point of view. Despite this, he enjoyed good relationships with NLD as well as ethnic party-members. Working as a political trainer he would provide trainings to the USDP, NLD and ethnic political parties. Through his own background as a Muslim, he was well-connected into that community, but also beyond it. He claimed to be a “broker” himself, using his contacts to create opportunities for different actors to meet. This gave him the feeling that he was able to make a difference in his society. Considering his own political affiliation, it was interesting that Myo would claim he did not want to work for Government, because it becomes more complicated to work in other fields. On the other hand, when there were demonstrations against the Government, he would make sure not to be around because he did not want to be affiliated with the opposition. Overall, he seemed comfortable in this ambiguous position,
which afforded him convenience, and hence, he did not seem to be willing to challenge the status quo. This myriad of actions and plans is interesting because it shows how young people like Myo can strategically move between different networks. Apart from aiming to change or keep the status quo, it also became clear that for a lot of young people securing their own survival was an important aspect of the strategies they choose.

Case Study Kant Kaw Education Centre: Ethnically Inclusive Education for Peacebuilding

Reflecting the particularities of Myanmar’s social, political and cultural characteristics, the findings show that the specific nature of the country’s conflict shapes how education for peacebuilding is understood and delivered in this specific case. The cornerstone of KKEC’s programme is its commitment to reflect Myanmar’s social diversity in the staff and student body. Students are recruited primarily in the country’s seven ethnic states, through the school managers’ own personal and professional networks, and supported through scholarships to live and study together in Yangon for the length of the programme. This first contact between students in each new cohort is a critical moment where many of them may meet youth of other ethnicities and religions for the first time, gain knowledge about other communities, break down prejudices and build understanding about each other. One student contended that “my ideas are probably a bit part of my ethnic [background], but here after I arrived, month by month, I understand [the other students]”. Another noted that “some classmates’ idea[s] are completely different. But it makes me to see from [the] other side”. Faced with the challenge of diversity, KKEC is tasked with creating an inclusive environment in which the differences between individuals do not inhibit their capacity to interact and learn, but open a learning space for all voices to be heard, and for positive experiences to take place. Building on the discussion of the 4Rs framework, this case study explores the intersection of peace, inclusion and education further, in the ways that staff and students at KKEC understand and experience what this research calls “ethnically-inclusive peace education”.

The programme is built along two key lines: a progressive curriculum informed by international good practice and a degree of experimentation, while directly confronting some of the key issues at the heart of Myanmar’s conflict, in the classroom. Conflict analysis, peacebuilding theory and civic education, based on cases in Myanmar and beyond, have students connect their own experiences to global examples. Communication skills are developed, to aid them in articulating different views effectively, and discussing more controversial or difficult topics in a constructive manner, with teachers encouraging group work and open debate as a way to explore ideas and negotiate differences. The school’s programme director, a member of Myanmar’s Karen ethnic community, described this process of interaction:

At first [they] maybe [think] ‘Kachin people are not good, Karen people are not good, Kayah people are not good’. But by letting them sit together in the classroom, it’s also in a way teaching each other. These lessons, in a way, [are] a kind of peace education. You need to understand, [in] each group you have differences and similarities.

At the time of research, the first democratic elections had taken place, but the transfer of power to the NLD government had not yet. Many students confirmed that the country’s history of political oppression and lack of freedoms continued to influence attitudes in their
communities, and speaking openly about these issues in school was unfamiliar territory. As they became more comfortable engaging with these issues throughout the school year, it became clear that some students were concerned that their knowledge and skill level in civic and political education seemed to impose a kind of responsibility on them to confront these issues. As well as opening students up to new knowledge and empowering them to act, it could be said that the KKEC programme highlighted the low levels of information and understanding around the peace process amongst its students, perhaps reflecting much of Myanmar’s population. This gives the impression of KKEC being a sort of “bubble” of knowledge, power and opportunity, and also responsibility, making students a new generation of active citizens in peacebuilding, as they may possess more of the key knowledge and skills than previous generations.

KKEC’s particular vision of peacebuilding is to put peace education skills and experiences into practice, for students to be able to become effective community leaders, in their own local areas and other parts of the country. The emphasis on community-led change is also addressed on a practical level. Students learn career-oriented skills such as leadership and project management, and are encouraged to build their CVs through volunteering and internship opportunities. An example of this is the curriculum’s ‘service learning’ element, in which academic and practical learning are combined around civic engagement and community service. Its aim is three-fold: to encourage students’ ‘spirit of volunteerism’ and awareness of community-driven change opportunities; to help students to give their academic skills and knowledge a practical basis; and to let students discover new and different parts of Myanmar and enter into a sharing and learning relationship with their host communities. In one group discussion with students, four out of five said that the most important experience they had at KKEC was service learning. This is summed up by the school’s director of programmes:

[One student] was assigned to stay in a remote village in area where there is no electricity, no running water, something like that. So when the night comes, you sleep. And water, you get it from the river. [He] started to learn how [to ride] a tractor, teaching the kids. I think it touched his heart, knowing the villages, and the daily experiences of the villagers. So after graduation, he wanted to teach. He wanted to serve the under-served children. So he went to work somewhere, teaching the children. Then, later, he got a job with World Vision in Mon State, to be coordinator for children’s education programmes.

In this example, the student combined this ‘experiential’ learning with the theoretical background and skills acquired at KKEC, applying them in a development position with an INGO, after graduating from the programme. For many thinkers in the field of peacebuilding education, such “experiential” learning is a central component of it. There must be recognition and analysis of conflicts in order to learn about de-escalation and prevention (Berghof Foundation 2012). Simultaneously, students of peace education must learn to actively resolve conflicts and promote peaceful social environments (Lopes Cardozo & May 2009).

The programme encourages in students a multi-scalar way of thinking around peacebuilding and development. By capitalising on students’ prior interests and any experience in civil society networks, the programme promotes a community-driven approach,
teaching skills that would allow students to work with different groups across Myanmar, such as communication and mediation. Simultaneously, examples and theory from the rest of the world are tied into discussion of conflict and peace processes. Finally, the use of English in the classroom, and the inclusion of career-oriented skills and experiences in the programme, are thought to enable graduates to work in English-speaking environments, with knowledge of how international labour and higher education markets function. This is exemplified in one student’s answer to the survey question of what they hope to do upon leaving KKEC:

First, I want to work [as] a volunteer in [a] NGO. Then, I want to apply [for a] scholarship to [study] abroad. My dream [is] to make business opportunities for my people from Rakhine and to help children who can’t go to school.

Here, the student seems to bring together the different threads within the KKEC curriculum, from service learning, to development skills, and university entrance preparation. This multiplicity also leads to a tension around the (un)intended outcomes of this education. As an unaccredited, private school, KKEC already operates somewhat removed from the national education system. On top of this, through its curriculum, teaching and the opportunities it gives students, KKEC provides channels for engaging in change and development systems that are outside of the current public sphere. It is possible that this form of organisation contributes to the bypassing of state institutions, for example in so-called “NGOisation” (the rise of NGOs that take charge of services traditionally provided by governments). This is problematic as it may undermine national education and labour systems by promoting decentralised and privatised institutions, jeopardising the capabilities of public institutions to respond to and address issues of conflict resolution, peacebuilding and youth leadership in comprehensive and nationally-owned ways.

Following October 2015’s elections, great changes were anticipated with the transition of power, and many young people in particular were impatiently waiting for chances to shape their futures in new ways. Democratic government has the potential to lead Myanmar to occupy a greater position on the international stage, rapidly bringing globalisation and all of its properties into the country, which have been largely absent until now. It is hoped by many in Myanmar that these changes will extend into the national education system through reform, expansion of access and improved quality. The question that KKEC should be asking itself for now is how far its curriculum enables students to enter this ‘new world’ in the changing country, and take an active position in effecting system change, on different levels. In other words, are students able to implement the skills and knowledge they have learned, to effectively contribute to peacebuilding and social, political and economic development in Myanmar, even as the context continues to evolve? For many students, the experience of learning in a multicultural and diverse environment was itself personally transformative, as described by KKEC’s school manager:

After this one year [students] develop friendship and understanding, understanding about different cultures. You will see [a] student, a Mon student for example, and now they are wearing [a] Karen outfit, something like that.

This, in a context where historical isolation has caused fragmented relationships between many communities, is perhaps one of the most important triumphs of KKEC’s programme.
Discussion

The two programmes outlined in the case studies above are very different. Myanmar Exitus provides political awareness training, given by local teachers, while KKEC focuses on community leadership and social studies, and is taught largely by an internationally-oriented staff. Both institutions offer independently-developed and time-bound programmes, which can be seen to contribute to the creation of an internal “bubble”. In both programmes, controversial and sensitive topics are discussed. It is important to recognise this, as it may be challenging for students to transfer the knowledge they gain within these courses, to situations and contexts outside of these environments.

In both case studies, it became clear that the participants in the programmes often already have connections to the organisation because they are familiar with the network of civil society actors in Myanmar. Respondents at Myanmar Exitus indicated that the same people are regularly invited for workshops or trainings, most of them living in or near Yangon. However, the inclusion of marginalised and remote-living youth is critical for any kind of movement for change in Myanmar, as politics and civic engagement are often centralised in Yangon. For change to be sustainable and far-reaching there has to be outreach to the full spectrum of diversity in the country’s communities. KKEC’s students generally represent this diversity, although they are recruited primarily through the civil society network, which the school and its managers belong to. This means that there is an inherent bias in the students apply for and attend the programme every year, excluding other marginalised young people. Opportunities are thus unequal and might lead to increased injustices. It is therefore important to pay attention to the equal distribution of opportunities for youth to enjoy this kind of education. This connects to the “redistribution” element in the 4R’s framework, as outlined in Chapter 2, which points out that in order to work towards sustainable peacebuilding opportunities, access to education should be equal for everyone.

In terms of the “reconciliation” element, and the ways in which education contributes to either integration and segregation, it remains interesting to see that the two programmes have differing intentions, yet the outcomes overlap. The main focus Myanmar Exitus is political education while they are not subversive, and training has different outcomes depending on what young people take from it. In that sense, Myanmar Exitus divides the youth community, who end up with very different thoughts and opinions, perhaps contributing to segregation more than integration. On the contrary, KKEC focuses on recognition and reconciliation, as their vision of inclusive development and peacebuilding for Myanmar can be seen as a response to the particularity of this country’s conflict. This is understood to stem from historic, political oppression, as well as ethnic and religious difference, which is addressed in KKEC’s “peace curriculum”. Through citizenship education, students are given knowledge and skills to engage in civic processes, to advocate for rights and freedoms, and to participate in the country’s political sphere. Simultaneously, the school places a strong emphasis on addressing and embracing the nation’s cultural diversity in the classroom, encouraging young people from many different communities to come together, to learn together and about each other. Community is seen as the core social entity for understanding conflict, bringing about change, peace and development. The school makes a case for national peacebuilding to be a bottom-up, locally-informed exercise, as a way to
address the particular context effectively. This is embodied in the emphasis on experiential learning and practical skills in the curriculum. That emphasis connects to peace education theory which demands strong attention to “various social, political, economic, historical and cultural contexts”, to be able to respond to realities on the ground (Berghof Foundation 2012). Although it is not an explicit aim of its programme, Myanmar Exitus, in contrast, may unconsciously create spaces for people with different opinions to engage and communicate with each other. In the case study of KKEC, that space is created more consciously, as this is a key objective of the school. Thus, both programmes bring young people together, thereby creating new spaces in which young people can learn with and from each other.

This shows that both education programmes that were provided often had unintended outcomes, which underscores the unpredictability and non-linear nature of schooling. It is therefore important that programmatic interventions and policies in this sector are implemented with great sensitivity toward the social, political and economic context in which it is embedded, so as to avoid contributing to indoctrination, segregation and conflict. It is essential to critically question and assess the broader strategically selective context of Myanmar, especially considering the many actors adopting different political agendas. A key finding of both case studies is the importance of analysing who decides what is desired from education, as this might have critical implications for the consequences of education.

The case study of KKEC showed that education can have unintended results which are important to reflect upon. An example of the challenge this presents is in language of instruction. Bearing in mind that Myanmar is made up of 135 ethno-linguistic groups, English was originally selected by the school as a neutral option, which lent itself to the discussion of politically sensitive and controversial topics, including conflict, history but also gender studies. The research revealed that the use of English in the classroom further contributed to the removal of KKEC’s curriculum from mainstream education in Myanmar, emphasising the “bubble” mentioned above. This bubble was also created within Myanmar Exitus, as this remained a place where generally sensitive political topics could be discussed. The language of instruction at Myanmar Exitus was mainly Burmese, which could have made it more difficult for young people from other states to join the programme.

While the case of KKEC in many ways corroborates and adds to existing ideas around peacebuilding education, the research found that the programme goes beyond just addressing peace and conflict. The focus on civic engagement, community experience and global issues, along with teaching language and career-oriented skills, contributes to “widening the gaze” of students and showing them different opportunities for their own lives. This is also the case for Myanmar Exitus. Although most young people did feel excluded from formal decision-making mechanisms, there were also those who sought opportunities to work as conflict transformers with other young people. They chose to contribute directly to their peer group in ways that appeal to them (see also Lopes Cardozo et al 2015). These strategies and activities often seemed to go largely un-rewarded and unseen, although they need to be recognized, rewarded and fostered in order for youth to have a meaningful contribution to the political transitions in Myanmar.
Myanmar Exitus and KKEC can both be seen as unconventional providers of knowledge and skills that fall outside the scope of Myanmar’s public education system, with a particular agenda around peacebuilding and political activism in the transitioning context. It remains important to point out that these parallel education systems that are emerging in Myanmar offer opportunities and can add subjects that are not covered in the formal curriculum. This highlights the general deficiency of Myanmar’s public education sector, which may prompt young people to engage in alternative systems of schooling and employment, outside of the mainstream, which could lead to a bifurcation of civil society initiatives for peacebuilding and reconciliation, potentially causing new exclusions, inequalities or conflicts.

Findings of this research thus illustrate that education can have “multiple faces”. In the first case study, Myanmar Exitus was able to motivate youth to participate in the political transitions while it was used as a political tool to diffuse the hegemonic state ideology (Lall 2014). Because the programme influenced some students but not others, it divided the youth community who ended up with different perspectives. In the second case study tension between local and international spheres is tangible, rendering uncertain which areas students feel prepared or inspired to work in. The predilection toward Western pedagogy and best practice in the programme resulted from a lack of home-grown solutions in Myanmar, since the opening of the school in 2009. In order for it to remain relevant and useful for the diverse group of students who join the programme, KKEC must continue to adapt in response to social and political developments in Myanmar, as well as the evolution of the peace process. Both case studies thus highlighted the positive/negative duality that is often seen in education research (see e.g. Lopes Cardozo & Shah 2014).

Conclusion
The core argument of this chapter study is that policies and programmatic interventions should aim to provide youth with circumstances to realize the positive contributions in the transitions the country is going through. It remains interesting to see to what extent non-formal education initiatives, such as Myanmar Exitus and KKEC, meet the demands of the economic and political landscape facing graduates, in their communities in Myanmar, and how students recognise the opportunities that are made available to them, and understand and experience the benefits of such programmes within larger movements of political development and peacebuilding.

These case studies show that where such education providers provide spaces for youth to learn and engage, the outcomes may be unpredictable and perhaps unintended. This is illustrated by KKEC students’ expressions of their future plans, post-graduation, which demonstrate an inclination toward further study abroad, and entering an international workplace. In the case study of Myanmar Exitus, this was shown by the fact that through the programme young people with different opinions were able to meet and learn from each other. Against the objective of Myanmar Exitus, some of them even used this new knowledge and experience to work towards challenging the status quo.

Generally, youth should not be seen as disengaged political subjects, but should not be generalized and over-idealised as actors for progressive change either. Without putting
too much emphasis on their youth-status, they should be provided with tools and opportunities to use their energy and agency in constructive ways, while taking into account the complex conflict-affected society they belong to. Perhaps the best way that can be done is to offer Myanmar’s young people the widest possible range in knowledge, skills and experiences, and provide spaces for them to explore the possibilities and opportunities that can come from these, at home and beyond.

References


