Promoting Social Inclusion in Schools:

Analyzing Policy Initiatives for Kayin State

In Summary:

♦ This study aims to identify barriers to social inclusion in Myanmar schools.

♦ To understand the barriers, data was collected through face-to-face surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews with middle schoolteachers, school principals, and middle students in Kayin State government schools.

♦ The findings reveal the perceived barriers and systemic hurdles that prevent social inclusion in the schools of Kayin State – but not limited to Myanmar's education system.

♦ In order to promote social inclusion in the schools, the author recommends these initiatives: encouraging positive interactions and relationships among students through cooperative learning; a whole-school approach that involves the participation of individual students, teachers, parents and communities; teaching human rights in schools; and the inclusion of cultural perspectives in school lessons.

Myanmar's Education System with Equity and Social Inclusion- Related Challenges

Since the 2011-political transition of the country, different governments have made the reform of the education system: for example, increased budget allocation on education in the Thein Sein government and prioritized the education system aiming to produce the human capital for the country's advancement in the National League for Democracy (NLD) led government.[1] Although the governments have taken such initiatives, there still remain many challenges including equity and social inclusion related issues. This includes, for example, the majority's history and culture focused education curriculum,[2] often including the discriminatory messages[3]; disparity in school-dropout rates at the pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education levels among urban and rural schools ; language barriers for students from minority ethnic groups.[4]

This study aims to identify barriers to social inclusion in Myanmar schools. In particular, it aims to explore how teachers and students perceive diversity and issues of social inclusion, and, likewise, how they experience these issues. It additionally examines initiatives and other interventions that can be put in place to address diversity and social inclusion in government schools.

Methodology

This study was conducted in middle schools (grades 6 and 7), from December 2019 to December 2020. To understand barriers to social inclusion in schools, data was collected through face-to-face surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews with teachers, school principals, and students in Kayin State Government schools. A total of 205 students and 35 teachers, for face-to-face surveys, were selected from one school located in each of all the seven townships of Kayin State; 70 of the students and 35 teachers also participated in focus group discussions, respectively; plus key informant interviews with two schools principals and one school officer. The participants were recruited based on the recommendations of local volunteers and the probability of the school featuring diversity among its student population.

Biases as Barriers to Social Inclusion in Kayin State Schools

◆ Verbal harassment was found to be a commonly occurring phenomenon in school environments, with the nature and form of verbal harassment and bullying differing, but most often focused on cultural identity, ethnicity, skin color, physical appearance, and language fluency.

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1. As part of the educational reform, the Myanmar government has enacted the National Educational Law (2014), followed by the National Education Law Amendment (2015), the National Education Strategic Plan (2016-2021), and a recently approved Basic Education Law (2019).
2. In 2018, 100 civil society groups signed an open letter complaining about racism and religious discrimination present in the elementary curriculum, with one example being "We loathe those of mixed blood, for they prohibit the progression of a race.
3. See at http://www.moe-st.gov.mm/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/OOSCIEng-Full.pdf
4. See at https://mecmigration.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/mec-baseline-children-with-disabilities-component.pdf

♦ The views of students and teachers were also inflected by perceived differences between men and women, with both teachers and students expressing the belief that women are inferior to men.

♦ Knowledge of the ways in which these biases interact with sexual identity and the concerns of LGBT individuals and communities is not well recognized in the school environment, with information about sexual identity and orientation rarely discussed amongst students and the teachers.

♦ Topics related to interpersonal differences and that had undertones, allusions, or references of a sexual nature are particularly challenging for teachers to discuss in the classroom.

Systemic Hurdles to Social Inclusion in Myanmar's Education System

♦ Within schools, while there are some limited attempts to celebrate differing cultural and religious identities, there remains a lack of a proper educational strategy for imparting the value of and respect for different cultures, practices, norms, and customs.

♦ Proper mechanisms for minimizing harassment, including anti-bullying programs, are rarely found in schools, with the responsibility for responding to harassment falling most often on individual teachers or independent teachers' initiatives

Possible Policy Initiatives

To promote social inclusion in educational settings, the following approaches are recommended:

School-level approaches:

(a) Teachers should attempt to encourage positive interactions and relationships among students through cooperative learning, which could provide students further opportunities to interact and collaborate with their classmates in pursuit of a shared goal.

(b) A "whole school" approach could also be considered as a mechanism to intervene in cases of bullying at schools. This approach involves the participation of individual students, teachers, parents, and representatives from schools' surrounding communities and should include the following prevention-related and responsive actions:

♦ Preventative actions: A working group, committee, or team should be formed with representatives of teachers and parents, which would then take the leading role in establishing policies and best practices for addressing bullying at school. Teachers could then be assigned to monitor classrooms, playgrounds, and other environments in schools' surrounding areas. Additionally, a monitoring group of students and teachers could be formed to prevent bullying, fighting, and other forms of misconduct from happening in the classrooms and school compound. In doing so, however, it is equally

vital to encourage every student, regardless of membership in the monitoring group, to report the cases of bullying. This should be done by providing clear information on the procedure for reporting bullying (including where and to who students can report) and for recording reported cases.

♦ Responsive actions: To respond to a student participating in bullying, teachers may, for example, issue an oral warning, call a student's parents/guardians, give detention, or deny them permission to attend classes for a short period, up to suspension from school. Another approach, however, could focus on restoring peace and justice amongst students rather than punishing them. In this latter approach, victims' safety should be ensured, and they could be encouraged to express their experience. Equally, the bully must also become aware of how they have affected others and should be encouraged to do better, and apologize for the damage they caused.

Policy-level approaches:

(a) An approach focused on teaching human rights in schools could establish a classroom environment that is more inclusive and responsive to student and teacher concerns. Teaching human rights at schools will promote a shared culture of equality, non-discrimination, inclusion, and participation.[5] Teachers play an important role in delivering knowledge as well as in nurturing respect for different values and practices.[6] In order to deliver a human rights education, firstly, teachers must be aware of the rights and responsibilities of the child, and relevant knowledge related to international human rights frameworks – such as the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child should be taught to students. Secondly, the teachers should be required to adopt a positive attitude towards human rights, one that would enable them to develop a non-discriminatory classroom in which rights are respected, in practice, by all. A non-discriminatory classroom would additionally involve teachers encouraging students to practice their own rights as well as protect others'.

(b) School lessons emphasizing a cultural perspective could support inclusive education. Content related to ethnic and cultural diversity should be included in schools' mainstream textbooks with more depth and frequency. The inclusion of ethnic and cultural perspectives in supplementary educational materials such as in visual aids, storybooks, games, and so forth, could also be a way to teach cultural diversity. In addition, using ethnic stories, literature and other materials illuminating ethnic perspectives in school lessons could be an option for diversity friendliness and thus, for inclusive education. This can encourage cultural interaction between students and can improve knowledge and understanding of students' differing cultural perceptions.

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5. See at https://www.amnesty.org/en/human-rights-education/human-rights-friendly-schools/
6. See at https://rm.coe.int/16802f726a