

*IS MYANMAR EDUCATION NEGATIVELY
INFLUENCED BY BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION?*

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Abstract

This study investigated inequalities and corruption in the Myanmar education system. It deliberates some of the key themes and driving forces which are inhibiting the development of a structure that promotes equality, democracy and an empowered student population, who are equipped with the knowledge and skill to take Myanmar forward into the rest of this century.

The full study considers some of the historical influences upon education, together with cultural, political and religious factors that have shaped the current situation. Firstly, through a process of secondary research, the author critically explores factors such as the tutoring system, international perspectives of corruption in education, and the preparation and training of teachers. Particular attention has been given to the themes of higher education and the distance learning process, together with the prerequisites to a critical thinking curriculum for all. This was achieved through a detailed critical analysis of the literature and discussion based on some of the important findings. The second part of this study was achieved through a small scale primary research study with a semi-random sample group of 51 respondents. This was designed to capture the experiences and opinions of participants and collected both quantitative demographic, and qualitative data.

The key recommendations are as follows:

1. The Myanmar government should implement ISO37001 Certification for all educational establishments in both the state and private sector.

2. The ‘tutoring’ system should be outlawed.
 3. The Government must ensure all funding is made available and that it reaches the classroom.
 4. A National complaints system specifically to report corruption in education should be established.
 5. Food poverty and hungry schoolchildren must be eradicated
 6. The Myanmar government should introduce a set of educational rights.
 7. The Ministry of Education should promote the use of technological advances to give greater credibility to their distance learning programmes.
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Introduction

The theme of corruption in education is important because bribery and corruption sabotages the development of educated, competent, and ethical young people, who are the future workforce, decision makers and leaders of Myanmar. Corruption in education erodes social trust, damages Myanmar’s reservoir of human capital and contaminates equality, ultimately undermining and destabilizing the well-being of our society.

A contemporary picture suggests that at primary school level, only 81 per cent of children aged 6–10 years attend school. UNICEF(2019a) reported quoting the 2014 census a calculation that 1 in 5 children are not attending, either because they never entered school or dropped out. Fees related to education are said to be one of the main causes for many children to give up on schooling. Another main reason for children to drop out of school is the limited quality and relevance of the education that is offered. Economic hardships force many young children to give up education in order to work. UNICEF (2019b) supported the Myanmar Government to implement the National Education Strategic Plan 2016–2021 (NESP (2016), and implement the goals of a National Early Childhood Care and Development Policy.

UNICEF (2019a)

Method and Methodology

The driving force to explore this topic was fired by three important factors. Firstly, Myanmar is considered to have a very low educational standard compared with both its South East Asian

neighbours, and the rest of the world. Secondly, and because of the first factor, there appears to be an assumption that Myanmar people are not very intelligent, disorganized and unable to compete within a global competitive environment. Thirdly, and most importantly, the author proposes, that the reasons for these first two phenomena, are rooted in a corrupt education system that places little value on critical thinking, places little emphasis on the potential of the poorest students, and is outdated in terms of its delivery. Despite Political assurances, the system could also be seen as disrespectful to the child's rights because its governance is weak and lacks the necessary resources to monitor and evaluate its performance.

Using a secondary research method the author attempted to gain a balanced view about the issues which give Myanmar a bad name for education. The differing perspectives of corruption in education were a main area of searching the internet.

To challenge some of the anecdotal evidence, a small scale primary research study was conducted to capture the experiences and opinions of 51 participants. Ten questions were distributed and participants were given the option to answer in Burmese

The results were analyzed using Excel, Voyant Tools and a simple content analysis where statements were categorized into themes, identifying trends, common experiences and opinions. Participant subject anonymity ethical standards were maintained

Results In Brief

Participants who work in education were asked if they had ever taken a bribe received a gift or other form of payment to help an individual student? "Those who attend tuition get highest score". One teacher commented that, "The only way students are comfortable in class is to give a small gift to the class teacher on the pretext that you are a good teacher. The same is true in most schools". "I want to make a living from education" may well reflect the low salary of teachers and reflect one who supplements her income through "donations".

Have you ever bribed a teacher? 40 percent (n = 20) admitted to bribing a teacher to:

"get a good school and class", "When transferring school we have to pay money to get the Principal's signature on paper" and "paid for the exam questions and answers", were some responses. "I was not able to answer well in one subject, so I bribed a purse to a teacher and I passed.

80.8 percent (n = 38) of the 47 respondents, believe that at the very least, corruption and bribery exists in some form within the Myanmar education system. These results correlate with the literature previously reviewed. Comments such as "I think it's get a good grade"

"Some students pay teachers to pass exam", "I have seen students who are not rich being discriminated against", and "Wealthy people are always giving gifts to their teachers, willing

to give or not. Based on this, discrimination arises”. “Students who can afford it are taken seriously, and students who cannot afford it are treated superficially”. It was suggested by participants that “Preference will be given to those who attend tuition” they “Give priority to children who have money” and “You have to pay a little to pass the exam”. One person suggested that “Most of the teachers in government schools offer tutoring and if the students in her class do not attend, they will be ignored in the class with poor grades”. All these statements confirm that these participants think that the system is corrupt.

“Corruption exists in all countries and all industries, including education. Unfortunately, with education it can be difficult because there are bribes, and then there are gifts of appreciation and donations. This is why when working in education it’s best not to accept gifts of money, unless they are going right back into the school. I myself as an experienced teacher have accepted gifts of appreciation from my students”, and “Parents want their children to get good grades”.

These results justify that corruption in education is present and that it is worthy of further analysis and exploration.

Discussion

The system to allocate schools, class streams and even seating places in the classroom, that exists Myanmar appears to be informal, covert, highly subjective and opaque, driven by “donations” and a ‘tutoring’ system of payment. Evidence suggests that Myanmar students have more limited rights, are not aware of them and as a result have become more vulnerable to being mistreated, undervalued and exploited.

Drawing on both questionnaire and interview data from students, teachers, principals, parents and other stakeholders in Myanmar, Liu, and Bray (2020) observe that Myanmar has suffered from financial stringency, large classes, and overloaded curriculum which has resulted in private tutoring becoming embedded within the education system.

Private tutoring or ‘moonlighting’ activity, exists to supplement very low official salaries raising the question of the impact that increasing teacher’s salaries might have. However, this would have little or no impact because, this system as demonstrated is a cultural element of the education system.

Conclusion

The pillars of a strong society must be underpinned by a strong education, free from corruption and driven by evidence. The fabric of our nation will rely on the understanding, knowledge

and skills of our children, and it is critical to instil moral and ethical values from the outset of their learning.

Navigating the political transition from authoritarian military rule to more democratic governance was a challenge which has been upended by the recent Military Coup (1.2.21), and to embrace equality within the education system against a backdrop of multiple and overlapping conflicts in cities and rural areas, is a complex, demanding and ongoing struggle.

References

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