

# The Myanmar Teacher's Experience: A Case Study of Two Local Teachers in an International School Setting in Myanmar

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## Abstract

In 2016 the Ministry of Education (MOE) for Myanmar introduced the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) (MOE, 2016), which identified 9 key areas to be addressed. The Ministry of Education states that 'teachers have been placed at the centre of the NESP goal' (MOE, 2016 p.11). This echoes, perhaps unintentionally, the work of John Hattie (Hattie, 2008), which consistently points to the key role of the teacher. Recruitment, training and on-going professional development are all areas specifically outlined in the National Education Strategic Plan. This research outlines the experiences of two Myanmar nationals who work in the education system of Myanmar, with a focus on the participants' motivations to join the teaching profession in their home country, their training histories and how they perceive the reforms currently underway. Their experiences and opinions are presented and discussed through a case study format, highlighting the inflexibility of the previous system and the perceived flaw of the system to prepare pupils for the changing world.

## Introduction

*'I want to improve my country's future for the benefit of everyone and education is the most important way of doing this and has the most impact' – participant 1.*

After a long time being closed off from the world, Myanmar is now a country in a period of rapid development. In an attempt to shift away from being 'generally recognised as economically and politically less developed than its neighbours in the South East Asia Region' (Oo, 2015 p.395) considerable reformations in multiple sectors have been initiated, including the Educational Sector. This change in education comes in the form of the Ministry of Education's National Education Strategic Plan (MOE, 2016).

Myanmar's current education system is divided into three components, based upon the type of provision provided. These are the state and monastic education systems, led by the Ministry of Education, and private providers, which are registered with the Ministry of Education but are not governed by the ministry in regard to quality of education provision, or teacher quality, and therefore fall outside of the scope of the National Education Strategic Plan.

The number of privately operated international schools has increased greatly on a global scale over recent years, the number of schools growing by 150% between 2000 and 2013 (Walker, 2015). In Myanmar, these schools underpin the state education system (Lall, 2011 and Hardman et al 2016), particularly as school provision provides an attractive investment opportunity for

both local and foreign investors (Pham, 2009). With local entrepreneurs and international groups such as Dulwich College and Nord Anglia opening schools in the country's largest city, Yangon (Department of Population, 2016), local teachers have the option to work for either an international school or the state system. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'local teacher' refers to a Myanmar national rather than a teacher in the geographic area. Many of Myanmar's international schools are not staffed by only expatriates, but a combination of expatriates and local staff.

The state school education system was introduced in 1962 and has remained mostly unchanged since then. At that time the school system was nationalised, with monastic schools being allowed to continue in rural areas where there were no state schools to provide education for communities (Lwin, 2000). The state and monastic systems have retained separate paths in many areas including the curriculum followed, the sources of funding, and the role they play in Myanmar society (Lorch, 2007). Following the publication of the National Education Strategic Plan, both monastic and state schools fall under the same scope for improvement and implementation of reform, which in itself poses issues that warrant further research.

With regards to the quality and quantity of teachers, there is little information on current numbers and the areas of their deployment, although the Ministry of Education recognises that issues are faced in the deployment of teachers to rural areas, in-service professional development, and the promotional system of teachers in the Myanmar education sector (MOE, 2016). Currently teachers are promoted on a "time served" basis, and this equates to progressing through the year groups to secondary, leaving a deficit of experienced teaching staff at the primary and lower primary levels (MOE 2016).

By the end of the financial year 2021 the National Education Strategic Plan has the core aim of achieving:

*'Improved teaching and learning, vocational education and training, research and innovation leading to measurable improvements in student achievement in all schools and educational institutions' (MOE, 2016 pp 9)*

It aims to achieve this by addressing nine key areas, including Teacher Education and Management (MOE, 2016 pp 51). This area is further broken down into three identified challenges: 1. Developing and retaining quality teachers, 2. Improving pre-service training, and 3. Providing access to effective continual professional development. With this in mind, the Ministry of Education has stated that 'teachers have been placed at the centre of the NESP goal' (MOE, 2016 pp 11).

While there is limited research on expatriate teachers in the international school setting (Bunnell, 2016), there is even less on the Myanmar nationals that work in the same system. As was argued by Solomon et al (1996), the attitudes, beliefs and practices that teachers hold impact the quality of education that students receive. As the Myanmar Ministry of Education aims to improve teacher education and management (MOE, 2016 p. 14), further research is needed to

understand the motivations and experiences of local teachers, particularly to identify what drives their decision making process when choosing whether to work in an international school setting or a local state school setting. Given that the current state system does not allow for foreign nationals to be employed as teachers, the importance of ensuring an effective home-grown workforce cannot be overstated. As monastic schools are currently staffed by members of the monastery they are not considered in this study.

Using a case study approach, (Gulsecen & Kubat, 2006) qualitative data was collected through several interviews - two one-hour interviews with participant 1 and three one-hour interviews with participant 2. The interviews focused upon the experiences and motivations of two local teachers employed in different schools within the international school sector. Both teachers have received extensive In-service training (INSET) from their employers and have a vast amount of work experience (more than 15 years each) in the field of education.

This paper provides an insight into the following questions, providing a base for further research and discussion on a much larger scale:

- 1) What are the motivations and career pathways of local teachers in Myanmar's international school sector?
- 2) Why do local teachers decide to teach in an international school setting and not pursue teaching in the state system?
- 3) Is effective training in place for local teachers in Myanmar's international schools, and if so, what can the Ministry of Education learn from that training?

## **Background**

### **Motivation to teach**

The global teacher shortage is widely reported in the western world and is a topic of discussion both within educational publications (see TES, 2019 as an example) and in mainstream popular media (see New York Times, 2020 as an example). In recognising that they are 'deeply concerned about current, or potential widespread teacher shortages, especially in certain subjects, or within certain geographic areas or demographic groups' (MOE, 2016 pp 144), the Ministry of Education in Myanmar is also bringing the teacher shortage to the forefront of policy making within the Myanmar national context. They note in particular that there is a need to form 'an understanding of what motivates different teachers to teach at high school, middle school and primary level (and in rural and urban areas)' (MOE, 2016 pp 144).

Teacher shortages elsewhere in the world are more acutely felt in rural and high-poverty areas (see Garcia, 2019 as an example). Myanmar's Ministry of Education is aware that the motivations of teaching staff have an impact on the level of provision (MOE, 2016) and given the recent history of dictatorship and regime change teachers may find it difficult to show support and levels of enthusiasm for governmental changes. The engagement with painful history in education has been shown to have an effect on teacher motivation and enthusiasm for their subject (Gross, 2013). With Myanmar's painful history being so recent and the previous curriculum avoiding areas of study that allowed for critique of the government (South

& Lall, 2016), local teachers could be driven to work in a setting that allows them more freedom of speech and action. Similarly there may exist a reluctance to exercise that freedom, as, until recently, it may have left them vulnerable to persecution. Although the new curriculum reform allows for greater scope in addressing areas of a sensitive nature, through the empowerment of students to review information using 'higher order thinking skills in the new basic education curriculum' (MOE 2016, pp.114), it must be considered that without an explicit update in the knowledge areas that the curriculum covers, vast periods of the country's long and detailed history will not be explored.

Several authors have concluded that in countries where educational reform is occurring following a regime change, or opening of the country, the motivations and ambitions of the staff play a critical role in the successful implementation of educational reform (see Sundar, 2013 and Hardman et al, 2012 as examples).

### **Teacher Training in Myanmar's international schools compared to the state INSET system**

Hardman et al (2016) concluded that the state teacher-training model in Myanmar had limitations and constraints with regard to developing effective methods of instruction. The Ministry of Education (2016) recognises these issues, beginning with preschool teacher training through to college teachers training:

*'there are still a number of service providers that do not meet the minimum quality standards established by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement (MSWRR). This highlights the need for preschool service providers to improve the quality of their services and for the MOE to establish a quality assurance system for preschool education. Moreover, a major factor affecting the quality of preschool services is the quality of teacher training programmes, which need improvement'* (MOE, 2016 pp 46)

As Wang et al (2017) argue, for improved pedagogical practice in Asia 'more professional development may be needed' (p. 40). As new pedagogical practices are introduced to the educational teacher training provision (MOE, 2016), the level of vulnerability and confidence of teachers will have an impact on the successful implementation. With improved INSET and Pre-Service Training (PRESET) provision teachers adopting new pedagogical practices and methods of instruction are more likely to feel confident in delivering the expected outcomes of the Ministry of Education's National Education Strategic Plan (Gordon et al, 1999).

The teachers in this study had both participated in extensive INSET programmes within their educational environment which aimed to develop the use of discursive pedagogical practice. These programs were research driven, externally provided and inclusive of both local and international teaching staff. Their schools also schedule regular INSET for teachers within the school calendar year with the aim of providing directed professional development following lesson observations and professional development plans for individual teachers. This provision of training is in stark contrast to the national system in which training is identified as inadequate

when it is provided it has been identified as being of poor quality and often inconsistent with the Ministry of Education's plans for reform (Lall, 2011).

The international school systems in Myanmar, by their very nature of operation, have aims of providing staff training for the diversity of the student body and school community. As both Oo (2015) and Lall (2011) have shown, the Myanmar state education system provides for a wide range of diverse cultures and peoples and there are plans to introduce more effective professional development for local teachers to address this (MOE, 2016). Pohan (1996) concluded that when teacher-training programmes do not address beliefs and attitudes surrounding diversity, then schools will be unable to provide effective teaching for the student body.

## **Methodology**

### **Case Study**

The perspective of the teacher in any school setting is one that should be considered seriously given the wide range of literature that demonstrates the impact it can have on the student experience (Feng, 2012).

'Through case study methods, a researcher is able to go beyond the quantitative statistical results and understand the behavioural conditions' (Zainal, 2007 p.1). This paper aimed to gather information of teachers' perspectives, motivations and decision-making processes; these are areas personal to each individual and cannot be generalised. They are also areas this paper aimed to research in great depth. As Hoepfl (1997) argues a greater level of detail and information on a specific individual allows much greater understanding of the whole, in comparison to a more general overview.

A case study approach is heavily debated as a method of inquiry, being argued to have a lack of reliability, however, as a method of inquiry it becomes prominently more effective and common in the field of education (Gulsecen & Kubat, 2006). Teaching being such a personal experience meaning that limiting research to a quantifiable methodology is likely to leave out much of the information that can be gathered from a more tailored approach. As has been argued in previous research, 'understanding something so intensely personal as teaching, it is critical we know about the person the teacher is' (Goodson, 1981 pp 69). The two case studies presented in this research are formed from interviews with the participants and review of the policy documents of the school setting. Due to ethical considerations policy documents are not explicitly referred to in the findings.

### **Participant Recruitment**

The relationship between the researcher and the participant in ethnographic studies is crucial to gaining not only trust and honesty but in order to best share the stories that are the core of the research (Ellis, 2006). Potential participants were already known to me via working connections within the community, and so a proposal for the opportunity to share experiences

and ideas was directly made to participants. Potential participants were contacted from a number of schools in the Yangon region, and once interest was expressed their direct managers were also informed. The participants were recruited from different schools, neither having worked directly for, or alongside, the researcher.

### **Translation**

As Hyatt & Meraud (2015) argue 'A critical approach to translation is central to ensuring the credibility of the analysis'. As this study features both policy documents and case study interviews with local staff it was crucial to ensure that any transcriptions of interviews or policies were a true reflection of meaning.

Although both teachers interviewed are English speakers, the level of English was identified as being a limiting factor in how well they could express their thoughts and emotions, with the limitations of their English vocabulary limiting the depth of information that could be gathered. As the validity of this paper relies so heavily on the accurate translation and transcription of interviews into English a robust methodology for translation and transcription checking was needed. The following process was used to ensure that any reported opinions of the teachers was as close a translation as possible from two such distinct language groups.

First, interviews were held in Burmese with a native bilingual translator of English and Burmese present to ensure that both participant and researcher were fully understood. Recordings of the interviews were then edited to remove translation audio and presented to a second bi-lingual translator for checking; both translators were aware that another party was translating interview audio. Following transcription into English, by the researcher, interviews were translated by both translators back into Burmese and shared with the participants, who then confirmed that the transcriptions were an accurate reflection of what they were expressing and that both translators had accurately been able to represent their views and opinions. Member checking allowed the participants to approve the transcripts of their narratives and an opportunity to reflect on their participation. This provided a platform for 'finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants' experiences' (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p.92). It also meant that the relationship between both participants and researcher was one of trust and honesty, even if member checking meant the withdrawal of several participants (Locke & Velamuri, 2009)

Policy documents referred to in this study were sourced as English version documents that were released by the schools for reference.

### **Ethics**

The political situation of Myanmar is volatile and as such ethical considerations were of crucial importance in designing and conducting the research, to ensure that participants felt safe and free to express their honest opinions and experiences. Considerations were also given to the fact that the research was vulnerable to insider bias, as the researcher was a direct manager of participant 1 and was authorised by the management of participant 2. Consideration was also given to the fact that there is a cultural reverence given to 'the westerner' by the local population,

with Myanmar nationals expressing desires and ideas that often are not held by the Myanmar national but voiced to appease and gain approval from non-nationals (Oo, 2015).

Following the initial research stage it became apparent that ethical issues were present in the study and that participants had high levels of concern about their involvement in the research process. Although the research originally included more participants, concerns around criticising the Ministry of Education caused some participants to withdraw, specifically related to opinions shared around the potential limitations and constraints that the reform act will face and issues with the current teacher-training model. As Ellis (2006) stated 'which secrets to keep, and which truths are worth telling' (p.26) became a key component of this research.

All original participants reviewed their transcripts, providing a platform for member checking, however as Locke & Velamuri (2009) discussed, this can lead to withdrawals from the study and the loss of important contributions. Given that the political situation in Myanmar is still heavily discussed and criticised in mainstream media, from both within and outside of its borders (see Myanmarmix, 2020 and BBC, 2020 as examples), it is not surprising that upon reflection many participants decided to withdraw consent, regardless of whether they had spoken negatively of the reforms or not. The remaining participants, although few in number, expressed a strong desire to continue as participants. As an author I feel obligated to share the stories of those involved in research who express a wish to see their stories published. Stories have become 'the way arguments are put forth, products and properties marketed, ideas floated, acts justified, reputations constructed or salvaged' (Yagoda 2009, p. 7) and as Yuval Noah Harari (2011) argues, narratives are what brings humanity together around a common cause. With effective reform for the good of Myanmar's students as the common cause between the participants, the author and the Ministry of Education, it is viewed as in the best interest of that cause to publish the stories available.

## Findings

### **What are the motivations and career pathways of local teachers in Myanmar's international school sector?**

*'I think that to make the country keep getting stronger and better we have to improve education for the younger generations.'* (Participant 1)

Neither of the participants came into teaching via a traditional route of the state education system, which is not an uncommon situation elsewhere in the world either (Guskey, 2003). Participant 1 actually had wanted to teach in the state education system but,

*'In Myanmar education when I was at school you sit examinations at Grade 10 and depending on what grade you get depends on which career you can get in life. I wanted to be a teacher but I could not because I [was] not be able to remember as much of the facts as I needed for the examinations.'* (participant 1).

They were then able to secure a role as a teaching assistant at an international school instead. At a time when the Myanmar education system has a lack of trained and willing teachers, particularly in rural areas (Lall, 2011) the rigidity of the teacher training requirements clearly limited the opportunities for recruitment.

When discussing the motivations to enter the educational sector and reasons for continuing to work in the educational sector, it was found that a main motivation was the success of the students, 'When I see my pupils succeed this gives me so much joy that I want to continue to teach more and more students' (participant 2). This is a common theme in teacher motivational studies (see Feng, 2012 for example) and speaks to the culture of Myanmar citizens. There are concerns in the local communities over discursive child-centred methods being encouraged in the international schools featured which are also expressed by state school teachers (Oo, 2015 & Lall, 2016). When asked about discursive practices in the classroom the concerns were raised that, 'Sometimes it is a little bit noisy but it is worth the risk for student benefit. Sometimes I don't do it though if it is special class with more than one class of students for an event because it is too many students and too loud for learning' (participant 1). This indicates the motivation to engage in pedagogical change exists but that cultural barriers may impede its successful implementation, particularly when transferred to the state system where classes are often much larger (Hardman et al, 2016).

### **Why do local teachers decide to teach in an international school setting and not the state system?**

An interesting finding of this study was that neither of the participants actively chose the international school setting over the state system. With participant 1 not being able to access the state school system due to their own educational background and stating that, 'I just wish I could help the children in Myanmar schools to learn more the same way as they do in international school, but that is not possible so I will continue to help the children here instead.' (participant 1), indicating that given the choice they would prefer to work in a state school setting. The same thoughts were reflected by participant 2 who stated that 'I don't want to teach international students, they have good teachers and lots of money and can pay for international coaching, they do not need me, Myanmar children do' (participant 2).

When both participants were asked about their perception of benefits of teaching in an international context now that they were employed in such a capacity, some interesting responses were given. Firstly there was much discussion that supports the work of Gross (2013) that 'teachers felt responsibility to approach the difficult past' (p. 118). Although in a different context, the work of Gross (2013) was centred around Polish teachers' willingness to teach about the Holocaust and concluded that, in reference to the Polish participants, 'their motivations can provide lessons for other countries facing educational reconciliatory efforts in the wake of ethnic cleansing or other brutalities suffered' (p.118). There is much in the news recently about the political state of Myanmar (see BBC, 2020 as an example) and the label of 'ethnic cleansing' and a humanitarian crisis. It is not for this paper to comment on the accuracy of any reports, however both participants mentioned that the opportunity to 'talk with students about misconceptions in



history is a good thing in international school. In Myanmar state schools the history books do not contain all of the information and are sometimes just full of lies. Some students think that England and Japan invaded Myanmar at the same time and were fighting over it, they do not know their own history. If I was teacher at state school I would not have known different myself but now I do know and now I can talk to students about what the Japanese were really like in World War 2 in Myanmar' (participant 1).

### **Is effective training in place for local teachers in Myanmar's international schools and if so, what can the Ministry of Education learn from that training?**

When asked about 'chalk-and-talk' both participants were aware of the term and felt that 'this means a bad way of teaching for the students. It is what they do in Myanmar [state] schools and like for me it did not work because I could not learn all that teacher told [us to study] for exam so I could not be teacher in Myanmar school but now I am a teacher and I think I am good for the student[s]' (participant 1). This is in line with both the Ministry of Education's own reports (MOE, 2016) and independent studies that have been conducted in state schools (Hardman et al, 2016). This knowledge was found to have been gained through INSET training at the international school for both teachers.

Both teachers had also received training in discursive approaches to teaching and recognised that 'It is very good for some things like revision or to test student's intelligence in a topic area and share ideas but for some activity it is not so good. I think you have to know when to use it effectively in class' (participant 1). Although this is not a wholly positive opinion of the pedagogical practice, it is encouraging that the participants are reflectively assessing their own practice. Research has previously shown that when learning new pedagogical practices, a reflective adoption of the new teaching behaviour is best for implementation (Gordon et al, 1999).

The participants were also both aware of the National Strategic Education Plan (MOE, 2016) and were positive about its stated aims and objectives, 'This will be good for the student and the teacher. I think it is the right decision' (participant 2).

## **Conclusion**

This study looked to explore the career paths and motivations of local teachers in Myanmar's international school sector and found support for what is seen elsewhere in the world, that teachers have a varied background and motivation for teaching but the core reasoning is to help develop the future of the pupils and country (Feng, 2012 & Klassen et al, 2011). The responses of the two Myanmar staff also highlight that there are many routes into teaching in Myanmar outside of the traditional route into teaching, but that even when there is a teacher shortage, the state system is currently too rigid to allow for higher recruitment levels.

A secondary aim of this study was to look at why teachers chose to teach in an international school setting rather than the state system and as Lall (2011) found, this can be due to the perception of the teacher to be able to teach to a high standard, 'the classes are much smaller too so it makes it easier to teach very good for the students. The facilities make it better' (participant 2), which also supports the work of Harfitt (2013) who argued that a smaller class size and improved facilities improves the teacher's perception of their pedagogical practice.

Both participants however, did similarly state that they had originally wanted to teach Myanmar children, not international students. This supports Solomon et al's (1996) assertion that local teachers have a greater motivation to teach in communities with lower socioeconomic development. The experiences of both teachers also show that they are positive about the changes the Ministry of Education's national education strategic plan and agree that further training would improve the level of teacher pedagogy (MOE, 2016).

Further research is needed across a larger demographic of teachers, but it is clear from this research that there are teachers in Myanmar who teach for the benefit of the children and want to aid the educational development of their country for the benefit of the pupils.

The study suffers from a very limited pool of participants, however as the aim of the study was not to provide generalisations but to give insight into very personal stories this is not an issue. The research also provides a starting point for discussion in an area that is under-researched and of high interest to not only the local level but also an international community. As Paine et al (2012) argue, educational development and reform is no longer a national concern, but is of global importance and interest. Being in a country that is facing development issues that are rare, if not unique, makes any research into the field of education in Myanmar worthwhile.

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