

REVIEWS OF POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

**Basic Education Curriculum Reforms in Myanmar and
the Role of Social Studies**

Wint Zaw Htet

Department of Educational Studies, Taunggyi Education College, Myanmar

Introduction

Myanmar is the second largest country in Southeast Asia with fertile lands, a rich culture and huge mineral resources and the population density is one of the lowest in ASEAN. According to 2014 Census, the population of Myanmar is 53.9 million. It has seven States and eight Regions with over 130 various ethnic groups. In recent years, Myanmar had many changes in various sectors as Politics, Economics including Education. As Myanmar has shifted to a democratic governance system under the 2008 constitution, it is vitally essential to upgrade all sectors in order to fulfill the standards of a democratic system. However, Myanmar is a country which has a heavy reliance upon the agricultural sector and its natural resources. In order to become a country with sustainable economic development, it needs to expand service and manufacturing sectors as well as it needs to utilize modern technology in agriculture. At the same time, Myanmar is struggling with many challenges such as equitable and growing disparity between rich and poor citizens, disparity in service access between urban and rural citizens, human trafficking along the country's borders, internal and external migration, drug abuse, the lack of medical knowledge among the citizens of mountainous regions and their health problems, conflicts and local wars among the ethnic groups.

We all know that it is really difficult to promote the country within a few years and it will be a big challenge for all of us. So, we realize that the most important thing is human resource and quality education in order to face these challenges. Thus, our national leader and State Counselor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said, "Education plays a central role in reducing poverty and inequity, increasing household incomes, improving individual and family health, strengthening our communities, fostering lasting peace, expanding economic development and building national unity (NESP, Ministry of Education, 2016)."

Therefore, Myanmar government is doing education reforms by implementing long-term and short-term plans including a new National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) during the period 2016-2021 with the vision of creating an education system that will generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the Knowledge Age.

Reasons of Making Basic Education Curriculum Reforms in Myanmar

Basic education curriculum plays an important role for the children and youths of every country by fulfilling their physical, intellectual, linguistic, emotional and social needs. Thus, the main purpose of doing

basic education curriculum reform in Myanmar is to implement a new curriculum that not only focuses on relevant 21st Century knowledge and skills but also aims to mend the deficiencies and weaknesses of the previous basic education curriculum.

Our country, Myanmar, did curriculum reform once, between 1995 and 1999 and that curriculum has been continuously used until 2015-2016 Academic year. It can be assumed as an outdated curriculum that makes Myanmar’s Education system less effective and far from the development of 21st Century skills. Meanwhile, Myanmar education system led to exam-oriented system to some extent since the teachers used to textbook based as well as Teacher-centered approach while students are used to rote-learning which prohibits the improvement of their creativity, critical thinking and reasoning skill(Soe, Swe, Aye, & Mon, 2017). Besides, in many places and remote areas, the lack of teaching aids and learning materials, insufficient teachers, and overcrowded classrooms are also the reasons that make Myanmar education system less effective. Moreover, it is required in the coming years to transform the national education system for all the students in order to make progress through quality learning standards by fulfilling their career and lifelong learning goals and aspirations. Furthermore, according to Myanmar National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2015), it is described that in Myanmar panorama of education that has paved its way from the olden monastic education to the nowadays education, there have never been the curriculum framework definitely worked out although the curriculum, various curriculum contents, textbooks, teachers guides with different teaching methods and various assessment forms were designed and used. Therefore, Myanmar Ministry of Education is now implementing the educational reforms by setting the curriculum framework with the direction of the National Education Law.

Curriculum Reforms and the New Curriculum Framework

A quality basic education curriculum is a critical building block for the country’s socio-economic development by being essential for providing the quality education as well as for promoting students’ learning achievement. So, the education system and curriculum are needed to be revised regularly.

According to the previous education system, the starting age for Kindergarten in Myanmar is 5 years old, which is one year earlier than that of ASEAN countries. Besides, the total school years for basic education of the current or previous education system is 11 years, which is one year less than that of ASEAN countries. In order to conform to the basic education structure of ASEAN countries, the starting age for Grade 1 has been

Table1. The previous structure

| Age | Grade | School level |
|-----|--------------|-----------------------|
| 15 | Grade11 | Upper Secondary Level |
| 14 | Grade10 | |
| 13 | Grade9 | |
| 12 | Grade8 | Lower Secondary Level |
| 11 | Grade7 | |
| 10 | Grade6 | |
| 9 | Grade5 | |
| 8 | Grade4 | Primary Level |
| 7 | Grade3 | |
| 6 | Grade2 | |
| 5 | KG or Grade1 | |

Table2. The new structure

| Age | Grade | School level |
|-----|---------|-----------------------|
| 17 | Grade12 | Upper Secondary Level |
| 16 | Grade11 | |
| 15 | Grade10 | |
| 14 | Grade9 | Lower Secondary Level |
| 13 | Grade8 | |
| 12 | Grade7 | |
| 11 | Grade6 | |
| 10 | Grade5 | Primary Level |
| 9 | Grade4 | |
| 8 | Grade3 | |
| 7 | Grade2 | |
| 6 | Grade1 | |
| 5 | KG | |

Table3. The timeframe of tasks for new curriculum reform (based on Ministry of Education)

| School Year | KG | Primary Level | Lower Secondary Level | Upper Secondary Level |
|--------------|----|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 2016-2017 Ay | KG | | | |
| 2017-2018 Ay | | Grade1 | | |
| 2018-2019 Ay | | Grade2 | | |
| 2019-2020 Ay | | Grade3 | Grade6 | |
| 2020-2021 Ay | | Grade4 | Grade7 | Grade10 |
| 2021-2022 Ay | | Grade5 | Grade8 | Grade11 |
| 2022-2023 Ay | | | Grade9 | Grade12 |

changed into 6 years old and the pervious education structure (5-4-2) was transformed into the KG+ (5-4-3) system. The Comparison of the previous and the new education structures are described in table1 and 2.

And the basic education curriculum reform was started to implement by the academic year 2016-2017 and now the curriculum reform is in progress and will be implemented in accordance with the schedule. The timeframe of tasks for new curriculum reform is in table 3.

According to Myanmar National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2015), the implementation of the curriculum reforms mainly focuses on achieving the aims of basic education which are intended for the students to be able to

1. Attend the school until the completion of basic education,
2. Develop “union spirit” and appreciate, maintain, and disseminate languages and literature, cultures, arts and traditional customs of all national groups,
3. Become good citizens with well-developed five strengths including critical thinking skills, communication skills and social skills,
4. Apply their civic and democratic in daily lives, and become good citizens who abide by laws,
5. Be competent in Myanmar language which is the official language of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and develop their skills in respective ethnic language and English,
6. Develop foundational knowledge and skills for higher learning and technical and vocational education,

7. Develop sound body and sportsmanship through participation in physical education activities and school health activities, and apply health knowledge in daily lives,
8. Appreciate and maintain natural environment and materialize its sustainability,
9. Become global citizens with awareness and appreciation of human diversity and abilities to practice basic knowledge of peace in their daily lives,
10. Take pride in being a citizen of the Union of Myanmar.

Simultaneously, for achieving the above aims of basic education, thirteen guiding principles are needed to be employed in the development of Basic Education Curriculum which are as follows;

- a. All-round, Balanced Development
- b. Good citizenship
- c. 21st Century Skills
- d. Notion of Completion in itself
- e. Preparation for Higher Learning
- f. Preparation for One's life in Myanmar Society and Modern Economy
- g. Balance in Academic Literacy
- h. Appreciation of All Cultures, Customs and Traditions
- i. Medium of Instruction
- j. Languages of National Groups
- k. Service to Family, School, Community and Society
- l. Peaceful Coexistence and Living in Harmony
- m. Promoting Equality.

Then, it will be needed to describe the curriculum structures of all levels which includes kindergarten, primary, secondary and upper secondary in order to generalize the new basic education curriculum structure.

At kindergarten, the curriculum structure consists of six learning areas according to age and developmental stage of the kindergarten students, which are (1) Wellbeing, (2) Moral, Social and Emotional Development, (3) Communication, (4) Appreciation of the Arts and Creativity, (5) Exploring Mathematics and (6) Knowledge and Understanding of the World.

The Primary school curriculum includes 10 learning areas which are (1) Myanmar, (2) English, (3) Mathematics, (4) Science, (5) Social Studies, (6) Physical Education, (7) Life Skills, (8) Moral and Civics, (9) Aesthetics (Music & Art), and (10) Local Curriculum.

The middle school curriculum consists of eleven learning areas which are all compulsory for the students. These areas are (1) Myanmar, (2) English, (3) Mathematics, (4) Science, (5) Social Study (Geography), (6) Social Study (History), (7) Physical Education, (7) Life Skills, (8) Moral and Civics, (9) Aesthetics (Music & Art), and (10) Local Curriculum (Job Opportunity and Personal Development). According to the new curriculum, 21st Century Skills are especially arranged to be taught with some contents depending on the locality.

At the high school level, however, there are two streams of twelve learning areas. The students can choose one of these two streams which are Science stream and Art stream.

The curriculum of the high school **Science Stream** consists of 11 areas of learning studied by all students, plus three art-based social studies electives of which students can select one. These learning areas are (1) Myanmar, (2) English, (3) Mathematics, (4) Physics, (5) Chemistry, (6) Biology, (7) Physical Education, (8)

Life Skills, (9) Moral and Civics, (10) Aesthetics (Music and Art), (11) Local Curriculum (Employability and Personal Development) and (12) one elective from Social Studies (Geography), Social Studies (History), and Social Studies (Economics).

On the other hand, the high school **Art Stream** is composed of 11 learning areas plus two science-based subjects and Optional Myanmar of which the students can select one. These areas are (1) Myanmar, (2) English, (3) Business Mathematics, (4) Social Studies (Geography), (5) Social Studies (History), (6) Social Studies (Economics), (7) Physical Education, (8) Life Skills, (9) Moral and Civics, (10) Aesthetics (Music and Art), (11) Local Curriculum (Employability and Personal Development) and (12) one elective from Physics (Integrated Physics and Chemistry), Biology (Integrated Biology and Chemistry) and Optional Myanmar.

The Role of Social Studies in Basic Education

According to the former basic education curriculum, the social studies subject is composed of Geography, History, Life skills, Moral and Civics, and Union Spirit (co-curriculum at the primary level). Among these four branches, geography and history are regarded more important than life skills and Moral and Civics because of the side effects of exam-oriented system, the conflict schedule and the insufficient number of teachers. Thus, some of the teachers give priority to the teaching of geography and history rather than Life skills and Moral and Civics since they have to teach many subjects for all periods per day. As the negative consequences, the students become loose at social and moral education. But the new curriculum may be the solution for this point by making life skills and Moral and Civics as compulsory subjects in all grades of basic education.

In addition, although the primary and middle school students have to study social studies as a compulsory subject, the high school students who select science subjects do not need to study social studies subjects such as Geography, History and Economics according to the former curriculum structure. Therefore, the essential knowledge about social studies becomes poor among the high school students. Indeed, every student at the basic education level should possess not only the geographical and historical knowledge but also the economic situation of his or her country and of the whole world. So the new education curriculum may be the solution to this problem.

According to the textbooks and teacher manuals of Social Studies of all grades (Ministry of Education, 2019-2020), Social studies subject is the study of the concepts_ how the people's careers, cooperation, performance and the use of information and technology are connecting to the duties and responsibilities of the citizens. In order to generalize comprehensively the teaching of social studies in Myanmar Basic Education, the brief description of five major parts would be needed_ Geography, History, Life Skills and Moral & Civics and the Local Curriculum in the new curriculum structure. And the contents of social studies become wider and wider as the Grade becomes higher and higher. The teachers use "the Expanding Environment Method" in teaching the connection of the past and the present.

The objectives of teaching social studies in basic education are;

1. To understand the basics of the natural environment and the livelihoods of different ethnic groups of Myanmar in order to utilize the knowledge in establishing more developed and better life.
2. To improve the reasoning skills about the relationship between their environment and their livelihoods.
3. To cultivate the Union spirit and nationalism by realizing the geographical and historical basics of the

country.

4. To become the good citizens who are capable of creating a peaceful society.

At the primary level, the social studies subject is not divided into Geography and History, the main concepts of these two subjects are combined into one subject. The main topics in lower primary level social studies are related to the students' surroundings and small circles of their environment such as "our family and home", "our classroom", "our school", "our school environment", "the town I live in" and so on. The contents of the country and various ethnic groups, the Locations of the States and Regions of Myanmar are taught at the upper primary level. The knowledge about the cardinal directions and weather are also introduced at this level. On the other hand, the biographies of the national heroes including the founders of the first, second and third Kingdom of Myanmar and the leaders of various ethnic groups who led at the revolution of the British Colonialism are taught in all grades of primary level so that the students would understand the history of Myanmar and get the national spirit.

At the middle school level (Grade 6 to Grade 9), Geography and History are taught separately with the specific topics. In Geography, four main parts are taught with respective sub-topics. The first part is about Physical Geography, which is concerned with the natural features and phenomenon of the earth and the universe, the solar and lunar eclipse, the landforms, climates, soils, vegetation and basic knowledge about weather. The second part is about the geographical features of Myanmar and the third part is about the features of Southeast Asia countries and the neighboring countries. The Fourth part is about teaching the practical lessons and using maps. On the other hand, History is composed of two main parts, Myanmar's History (in which the founding of the first, second and third Myanmar Kingdoms and the development of civilization, language and cultures as well as the situations of Myanmar under the British Empires and Japanese Empires and the revolutions, and the situations of Myanmar until today are taught) and the World's History in order to trace the history of the world and to take lessons from it.

Although Life Skills and Moral and Civics become compulsory subjects in the new curriculum, they are actually parts of the social studies since all the contents in these subjects are closely associated with the teaching of social studies. So, I would like to describe briefly about the interesting syllabus of Life Skills and Moral and Civic Education.

Life skills mean the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary for a person to live happily or survive in a society in better ways. Thus, the general objectives of teaching life skills in basic education are;

1. To live healthy by utilizing the good habits with the knowledge about the personal hygiene, eating balanced foods and prevention common diseases in their environment.
2. To become the sociable persons with positive thinking who are able to communicate with others in the society.
3. To become the flexible persons who are able to response suitably to the consequences of various disasters caused by environmental impact and to reduce them as much as possible.
4. To develop not only the important life skills such as problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, interpersonal communication but also mental skills such as self-awareness, empathy and skills of controlling emotions and stress.

In teaching Life Skills lessons, the following main sectors are laid down for each level.

Main Sectors of Life skills in Primary level are (1) Disease Prevention and Nutrition, (2) Essential social

skills and (3) Sustaining natural environment and Ways to act. While the main sectors of Life skills in Secondary level are (1) Social skills, (2) Environment and Sanitation, (3) Disease prevention and Nutrition, (4) Reproductive Health, (5) HIV/ AIDS and STI, (6) Drug Use and (7) Emotional Intelligence.

At the same time, the teaching of Moral and Civic Education plays a crucial role in promoting students' character and moral aspect. The objectives of teaching moral and civic education are;

- (1) To utilize the right ethical behaviors by analyzing systematically,
- (2) To be able to value human rights by following the duties and responsibilities of a citizen,
- (3) To pay attention and respect to the rules and disciplines,
- (4) To behave well not only as a productive citizen of the country but also a fruitful person of the world.

Since nearly 90% of Myanmar population is Buddhists, the previous moral and civic education curriculum emphasizes on the teaching of Buddha and Myanmar culture and traditions. The lessons mainly give the students the instructions in order to utilize the positive values and practices as well as to avoid the negative behaviors in relation to social communication.

However, Myanmar is on the path to Democracy and thus, the new curriculum on this area emphasizes on the teaching of the ethics of a person which should be followed regardless of skin color, religion, class and ethnic groups in order to implement the essence of democracy. Besides, there are eight major ethnic groups in Myanmar and most of the people from three major ethnic groups as Kachin, Kayin and Chin are Christians and there are also a few Muslims and Hindus. In order to implement the essence of democracy which emphasizes on diversity and individuality, the curriculum should not teach only the Buddhist teachings. So the new curriculum is planned to introduce to the students.

The four major parts of the new curriculum are;

- (1) Ethics among social relations,
- (2) Opportunity and Responsibility,
- (3) Discipline and the Importance of Laws and
- (4) Peace and Unity.

The first section teaches the students how to behave effectively and politely in accompanied with Myanmar Culture among the family members and why they should pay respect to others and why they should value honesty and dignity. The second section aims at promoting students' understanding about the meaning of opportunity and responsibility; as a result, they are expected to take responsibility of their respective roles. The third section simply conveys the students the concepts of the importance of rules and disciplines starting from the small circles to the larger environments in order that they could be able to cooperate with other members of the society. Then, the fourth part emphasizes on the teaching of the meaning of peace. Since Myanmar is a country composed of seven States and eight Regions in which over 130 ethnic groups having different languages and traditions are living together, many conflicts are often occurred for various reasons. So it is essential for the students to realize the meaning and value of peace and the importance of respect to the values, culture and traditions of other ethnic groups as they value their own ones. Ultimately, they are expected to solve the conflicts in the best ways.

The most interesting area for me is the Local Curriculum since it is the very first new learning area of the new curriculum. I think it is very important for teaching the 21st Century Skills effectively and will be the best connection between education and employment or job sector which has never been taught in the previous

curriculum and textbooks. The Local Curriculum aims at employability and personal development in which the major contents are ethnic languages, their histories and traditional cultures, local economic condition, agricultural business, basic information and communication technology, basic computer skills, career skills and home management skills. All the contents are arranged to teach in accordance with local needs. Although most of the developed countries are emphasizing on the career education sector which is strongly related to the economics of the country, the old curriculum of Myanmar did not have enough teaching and practice for career education which can be recognized as the Local Curriculum. Therefore, I think the Local Curriculum is the new special part of the new curriculum.

Challenges of Basic Education Curriculum Reform and Conclusion

Although the government and the Ministry of Education are focusing on the Education sector and implementing the new changes and reforms, there are still many challenges. Therefore, we should expect the possible challenges and we need to prepare as much as possible in order to face and overcome these. In my idea, there may be variety of challenges for every new change and reform that we should not be scared and the only thing we can do and should do is to face them with sufficient preparation.

The first challenge is whether the aims of the new curriculum can be fulfilled or not. In some remote areas with difficult transportation, the insufficient numbers of teachers have to teach many subjects and thus some of them are difficult to teach for achieving the targets of all subjects even in the previous curriculum. So, the challenge is how the teachers will handle to teach the new curriculum which has more learning areas than the previous one.

The second challenge is whether the teachers will actually change or upgrade their teaching methods which will be needed to reach the targets of the new curriculum. According to Myanmar culture and traditions, teachers are always superior to the students and the ethics of the students is to pay respect to the teachers and to obey the advice and suggestions what the teachers say. On the other hand, promoting students' critical thinking and reasoning will surely need to give the students the chance to question to the teachers. Most of the students are found being reluctant to ask questions because of this reason. And the teaching method like Child Centered Approach can really be utilized or not is still a very big challenge because of the big class size. Therefore, will the students' critical thinking and reasoning be promoted in the new curriculum implementation?

Then, the third challenge is whether the facilities can be supplied enough to teach the physical education and aesthetics (Music and Art). And how to change the assessment and evaluation system is also an interesting challenge in order to reduce the exam-oriented system.

However, I think that there is always a hope for every reform and success for every effort and attempt. And every good system is a long-term process which takes time to implement. So, our country, Myanmar, is trying to upgrade the country in various sectors including education by setting the systematic plans and processes. So, I do hope we will surely promote our education system to be better than ever before.

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