



Having an EfECT: Professional development for teacher educators in Myanmar

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HIGHLIGHTS

- National two-year project to develop teacher educator competence in Myanmar.
- English language, teaching knowledge, confidence, teaching and reflective skills targeted.
- Several baseline and exit measures collected from 1647 teacher educators.
- Impact of the project on teacher educator competence was varied but overall positive.
- Project's evaluation tools critically examined.

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ABSTRACT

As part of Myanmar's current educational reforms, the EfECT project aimed to improve the competence of pre-service teacher educators in Education Colleges across the country. Drawing on baseline and exit measures collected through questionnaires, tests, observations, interviews and written reflections, this paper examines the impact of the two-year project on 1647 teacher educators' propositional knowledge of teaching methodology, practical teaching skills, reflective abilities and professional confidence. Overall, but not exclusively, the outcomes of the project in relation to these issues were positive, and these results are analysed critically with particular attention to the tools used to measure project impact.

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the impact of the English for Education College Trainers Project (EfECT), a large-scale teacher educator development initiative in Myanmar. We begin by outlining the educational context for the project before discussing the dimensions of professional competence that it addressed. The design, objectives, implementation and evaluation of the project are then

described, followed by an analysis of its key results and a discussion of the kinds of impact it achieved. Overall, the account we present has implications for the design and evaluation of teacher and teacher educator professional development projects more generally.

1.1. Education in Myanmar

Strategically located between the economic hubs of China, India and the ASEAN countries, Myanmar is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia. In 1948, at the end of the colonial period, Myanmar's education system was considered superior to many other neighbouring states, with adult literacy, at close to 60%, among the highest in the region (UNESCO, 2006). Following the military coup in 1962, however, the Myanmar education system went into long-term decline and by the new millennium it

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languished at the bottom of the league table of ASEAN countries for educational enrolment, achievement and investment (Ministry of Education, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). The situation started to change with the reform process initiated by President Thein Sein, with the military government realising that improving educational access and quality was key to regaining domestic legitimacy (Pyoe Pin, 2014). In 2015 there was a smooth transfer of power to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy Party (NLD), which prior to its election had already made education one of its priorities. (Myanmar National League for Democracy Party, 2014).

In terms of UNESCO's pillars of learning,⁴ the Myanmar education system focuses heavily on the first pillar, 'learning to know' (UNESCO, 2006), with a model of learning that is predominantly receptive (Carnell & Lodge, 2002), encourages dependency by the learner on the teacher, and where assessment focuses on the quantity of knowledge learned. A study of pedagogical practices in 23 primary school lessons by Hardman, Stoff, Elliott, and Ackers (2010), for instance, found that opportunities for collaborative learning, critical thinking and problem solving were rarely observed.

As part of its reforms, Myanmar has committed to child-centred approaches (CCA) to learning. Several initiatives have been implemented in recent years to promote CCA (an approach to learning that maximises children's active involvement, is grounded in their interests and needs, and promotes creativity and problem-solving skills)⁵ but, overall, the evidence from evaluations of these projects does not suggest they have had a major impact on changing established modes of teaching and learning in the country. For example, a summative review of the four-year JICA project 'Strengthening of Child-Centred Approach' found little positive change between baseline and end of project in the attitudes of teachers and students (JICA, 2007). From 2001, UNICEF's Child Friendly Schools and Early Childhood Care Development projects focused on school improvement planning and promoting CCA through in-service training. Again, an evaluation of these projects found that the interventions had limited impact on the quality of teaching and learning (Clarke, 2010). The National Education Sector Plan reached similar conclusions, noting that "the MOE rolled out child-centred approach trainings across the country and in education colleges from 2004 to 2011, yet these were found to have little impact" (Ministry of Education, 2015). Overall, the evidence suggests that CCA has failed to take root in Myanmar and a range of factors have been cited to explain this. In particular, logistical issues which are seen by teachers to hinder interactive and activity-based child-centred learning "such as high student-teacher ratios, lack of space, lack of teaching aids and lack of time" (Lall, 2010, p. 2) have been cited, as well as a "deep incompatibility between CCA ... and the exam system" (Lall, San, San, Myat, & Khaing, 2013, p. 1).

These conclusions suggest that educational reform in Myanmar has been either over-ambitious and/or contextually inappropriate. Evidence from elsewhere (Altinyelken, 2011; Song, 2015 in Turkey and Cambodia respectively) does in fact support the view that reforms which assume that pedagogies can be transferred unproblematically across contexts (on cultural resistance to pedagogical imports, see also Hu, 2002) and seek to replace a deeply-entrenched educational orthodoxy with a radically different alternative are unlikely to succeed. Reflecting on such issues more generally, Schweisfurth (2011: 425) concludes that "the history of the implementation of LCE [learner-centred education] is riddled

with stories of failure grand and small".

1.2. Initial teacher education in Myanmar

EFFECT took place in the context of initial teacher education in Myanmar, which is delivered primarily through 22 Teacher Education Colleges and two Universities of Education (Ministry of Education, 2015). These institutions prepare teachers for the state basic education sector which comprises five years of primary education (Kindergarten to Grade 4), four years of lower secondary and two years of upper secondary education. There are 47,363 basic education schools in Myanmar reaching approximately 9.26 million students (Ministry of Education, 2016). Each Education College is led by a principal and has three kinds of teacher educators. Academic teacher educators teach subject knowledge, Methodology teacher educators teach pedagogy (including for specific subjects), while Co-curriculum teacher educators teach agriculture, domestic science, music, fine arts, industrial arts, technical handicrafts and physical education. Teacher educators do not necessarily have teaching experience in schools themselves and most will have not received any specific pedagogical training.

There has been limited research into teacher educators' practices in Myanmar but the evidence available suggests that it reflects the knowledge-accumulation model described above. For example, Aung, Hardman, and Myint (2013) conducted observations of initial teacher education sessions in four Education Colleges, reviewed curriculum documents and carried out semi-structured interviews with principals and focus group interviews with teacher educators and students. Their analysis concluded that in initial teacher education in Myanmar there was a dominant emphasis on transmitting theoretical knowledge about teaching and that student teachers were lectured to in large groups much of the time.

Overall, then, despite reform efforts, education in Myanmar is characterised, in both state schools and Education Colleges, by the continued dominance of a learning paradigm that emphasises knowledge accumulation, memorisation and reproduction.

2. Teacher competence

The goal of EFFECT was to enhance the competence of initial teacher educators in Myanmar. As noted earlier, though, many of these individuals had limited or no teaching experience in schools and had not had opportunities to develop their own core instructional and more broadly professional skills. Thus while the project team were aware of the literature on teacher educator development (e.g. Bates, Swennen, & Jones, 2011; Knight et al., 2014; Loughran, 2014; Lunenberg, Dengerink, & Korthagen, 2014), it was felt that, before more advanced work on teacher educator competences (such as, for example, how to observe and give feedback on teaching) would be feasible, it was first necessary to develop the more fundamental areas of teacher educators' work – i.e. their competence as teachers.

Teacher competence is multi-faceted (Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijs, & Robinson, 2004; Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008) and is defined through complex interactions among a range of behavioural, cognitive, metacognitive, interpersonal, attitudinal and affective attributes. It was therefore necessary to make decisions about which core aspects of teacher educators' work to target. These decisions were informed by various sources, both theoretical and practical. One was the literature on instructional effectiveness (for example, Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Major, 2014; Hattie, 2009) and various widely-cited frameworks of competences (such as Danielson Group, 2013; Marzano & Toth, 2013) and standards (Department for Education, 2011; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2016) that define what teachers should know

⁴ The four original pillars (Delors, 1996) are learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together, with a fifth pillar - learning to transform oneself and society - added later.

⁵ See <https://www.jica.go.jp/myanmar/english/activities/activity01.html>.

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