



Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies

journal homepage: <https://www.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/HRPS/index>



Teaching Human Rights in Myanmar: Challenges faced by Primary School Teachers

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received: 17-Jun-2021

Revised: 29-Jun-2021

Accepted: 04-Aug-2021

Keywords:

Human Right Education,

Primary School,

Social Norms, Myanmar

Myanmar is a country trying to build a democratic and peaceful society. In this regard, education is important to ensure that citizens understand human rights values and abide by law. In primary education, the initiative to compulsorily integrate Human Rights Education (HRE) is reflected in the National Education Policy, where the National Education Law (2014) and Basic Education Law (2019) are endorsed respectively. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges of primary school teachers who are teaching a new curriculum which integrates HRE lessons into the existing school curricula in Myanmar. The study used qualitative research methods including reviewing textbooks, laws, international instruments and academic literature. In order to gain insights into the implementation of HRE in schools, semi-structured interviews were conducted with officers of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC), primary school teachers and headmasters from Mandalay Region and Shan State. The findings reveal the challenges teachers face in teaching HRE lessons in their classes. Myanmar's traditional social norms, which somewhat contradict to the universal values of human rights, have a significant influence on how teachers interpret the curriculum. Teachers' limited knowledge of human rights concepts, together with inadequate teaching resources and language barriers, contribute to ineffective teaching of HRE in primary schools.

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Introduction

The victory of a civilian-led political party over the military who ruled Myanmar for more than 60 years in the 2015 national election marked a historic turning point. Since then, Myanmar's citizens are striving to promote democracy and human rights with support from international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) (McCain Institute, 2019). Human Rights Education (HRE) is a unique strategy for the building of a universal culture of human rights (Claude, 2005). INGOs and local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are actively providing human rights training outside a school setting across the country (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners [AAPP], 2018).

Myanmar has developed Human Rights Education (HRE) within the education system. For example, in higher education, human rights has been introduced in Myanmar in Departments of Law in 2012 as an elective course and is currently a compulsory subject for third Year LL.B students and an elective course for students who are majoring in International Relations (Zue, 2019). In primary education, the initiative to compulsorily integrate HRE is reflected in the National Education Policy, where the National Education Law (2014) and the Basic Education Law (2019) are endorsed respectively. Section 3(b) of the National Education Law expressly states the purpose of education, "to nurture and produce citizens who respect and abide by the law by practicing their civic and democratic duties and standards of human rights." Furthermore, section 3(c) of the Basic Education Law reinstated the purpose of the National Education Law as "to become a person, knowing responsibility and accountability, who respects and abides by the law and is accountable by practicing their civic and democratic duties and standards of human rights."

The policy and laws on national education were implemented in primary schools, human rights education applied in the 2018-19 academic year and began with the Grade 2 curriculum. It will be extended to all higher grades in basic education by the 2022-23 academic year. This success was a result of an effort of the Myanmar Educational Research Bureau with support and collaboration from experts from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC) plays a crucial role in promoting and implementing human rights education in Myanmar. In its mandate to promote human rights in Myanmar, the MNHRC set a goal to create a human rights culture in Myanmar through education and awareness by working with the Ministry of Education to include human rights in the general school curriculum. To promote awareness of human rights, the MNHRC holds human rights themes competitions at school level, through painting, essays, poems, elocution, song competitions etc. (Myanmar National Human Rights Commission [MNHRC], 2014). To implement HRE at primary school level, teachers are the key players to teach human rights concepts comprehensively. Training for teaching the new curricula is provided by the Ministry of Education at three levels including the Regional/State, District and Township levels. However, it remains unclear if teachers are gaining sufficient knowledge from the training about the new curricula and human rights concepts to be able to apply it in their classes.

Remarkably, it is acknowledged that Asian countries do not unequivocally accept the universal principles of human rights (Plantilla, 2012). Collectively they have insisted the need to consider the significance of cultural background and national particularity, as the Bangkok Declaration on Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1993) stipulated, to; “Recognize that while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds.” Joanne Bauer alleges that Asian governments have sent a message to the international community that Asia intends to set its own standards for human rights (Bauer, 1996). This gave rise to a question as to how human rights would be applied in the education system of Myanmar given the social and cultural context. In a context where pupils in Myanmar have duties to “stand up and welcome their teachers when they see the teachers coming, to attend and wait upon their teachers, to obey the words of the teachers, to serve the teachers and supply their needs, and to learn carefully and respectfully what is taught by the teachers” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2003).

Implementing HRE is a common challenge in many countries in different ways, and researchers can explore the challenges in searching for an opportunity for a better

implementation of HRE. Such studies have included: the tensions and challenges facing schools' practical routes to implementing HRE programs (Audrey & Chalank, 2013), opportunities, challenges, and future possibilities of HRE (Kingston 2014), HRE and teacher's responsibilities (Carol et al., 2020) and exploring possible links between teachers' understandings of human rights and human rights teaching (Zembylas et al., 2015).

However, few studies have sought to systematically examine civic education in Myanmar (The Other Space Foundation Report 2013), practical activities for teaching human rights in primary and secondary schools (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [UN Human Rights], 2004) and a focus on education and peacebuilding. As yet, there is no research focused on HRE in the new national curriculum and the practical challenges for teachers who are teaching and implementing HRE in primary schools. Therefore, this study aims to examine the extent to which teachers apply and integrate human rights concepts to their curriculum and explores the challenges faced by primary school teachers in teaching human rights in Myanmar.

The paper begins with a brief discussion on the implementation of human rights through primary education in the academic literature. It then briefly reviews existing research on challenges for primary school teachers in teaching human rights and discusses the methodological design of the study. The next part of the paper reviews the contents of Grade 2 and 3 textbooks to aid the understanding of the extent of knowledge of teachers to educate pupils about human rights. The discussion presents an analysis of the interview data concerning informants' views of the new curricula and their experience of teaching it. Finally, the study makes practical recommendations based on its findings in promoting HRE in Myanmar.

Human Rights Education and its Integration in Primary Education

Human rights education (HRE) has gained increasing attention over the past 30 years as a tool for promoting peace, tolerance, social responsibility, and global respect for international human rights standards. The World Conference on Human Rights, held in 1993,

concluded that states are duty bound “to ensure that education is aimed at strengthening the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms” (UN Human Rights, 1993). It further emphasized the importance of incorporating human rights subjects into programmes of study. The International Decade for Human Rights Education, from 1995 to 2004, was a major UN-led international initiative to push for the promotion and dissemination of human rights through education.

Education is commonly understood as a human right. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) confirms the right to education which promotes human rights, intercultural understanding and learning to live together, an education which promotes gender equality, and conditions which guarantee certain cultural and linguistic rights of parents and children. It stresses the obligation of the nation-state, as the ratifying authority, to promote education for peaceful co-existence in their communities, the nation and the wider world. However, HRE is less well-known. HRE is an articulation of the right set out in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and further strengthened by the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, adopted in December 2011 (United Nations General Assembly, 2012). HRE is education about, for and through human rights (Bajaj, 2017). HRE comprises educational activities, curricula and programmes that concentrate on promoting equality in human dignity. It aims to empower learners to cultivate a culture of human rights in society (Brander et al., 2020).

Although INGOs and NGOs are supporting implementation of HRE in Myanmar, according to the UDHR the government has the principal duty to implement the promotion and protection of human rights in its territory. Currently in Myanmar, the authorities are struggling to build trust with the many armed groups in the country, through the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement between the Governments of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the Ethnic Armed Organizations (NCA) (2015) and, socially, is trying to build a peaceful and harmonious society among the many different ethnic groups. To achieve the ultimate goal of building a democratic nation, HRE in school settings is one of the ways to advance democratization in Myanmar society (McCain Institute, 2019; Frigon, 2014).

According to Tibbits and Kirchsclaeger, the implementation of HRE encompasses

policies, methodologies, curriculum initiatives, teacher training, professional development programs and the conditions for promoting HRE practice. Among the studies undertaken, a few have reported on the curriculum, the role of NGOs and the importance of professional development and training of teachers (Tibbits & Kirchsclaeger, 2010). Retselisitsoe and Alfred surveyed teachers' knowledge of human rights in primary schools in Lesotho. The study found that teachers have no knowledge of international and regional treaties which address the rights of the child. However, they are aware of some rights such as the right to education and right to be protected from abuse. It also found that teachers can advocate for the protection of children's rights and seek help when those rights are violated (Matheolane & Makura, 2014). HRE cannot be reduced to the simple introduction of theoretical content about human rights, but must address HRE through a holistic approach. This approach demands that human rights education implies both the learning and practice of human rights (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003). According to the Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center (HURIGHTS OSAKA), the content of HRE programmes in schools should include not only human rights concepts and principles but also engage with students' actual experiences relating to human rights using, for example, essays, poems and art works (HURIGHTS OSAKA, 1999).

Myanmar has adopted a new curriculum of moral and civic education, life skills and social studies, integrating HRE into most school subjects and developing textbooks with the aim of nurturing citizenship by providing democratic citizenship education and human rights education (National Education Law, 2014; Basic Education Law, 2019). The differences between citizenship education and human rights education, a recommendation of Council of Europe highlighted these in the following terms:

Education for democratic citizenship emphasizes primarily on democratic rights and responsibilities and active participation in the democratic life. Whereas, human rights education is concerned with the broader sphere of human rights and fundamental freedoms in every aspect of people's lives" (Council of Europe, 2010).

A focus on the teaching of ‘Myanmar values’ in Grades 3 and 4 in the previous curriculum was discussed in an Equality Myanmar report as Myanmar cultivating obedient students and fostering a patriotic spirit (Eqmmlibook, 2018). However, the report made no attempt to justify why these particular values are those of Myanmar or to consider aspects of ‘Myanmar values’ that may not align with human rights principles. As Nyi Win Hman (2012) states, for instance, in Myanmar culture, students and young people have to obey teachers and older people although their opinions may be different from their own. Obeying teachers and older people is an obligation of children mentioned in sections 66 (b) and (c) of the Child Rights Law 2019. Section 69 stipulates that a teacher is not allowed to punish a student for disobedience by beating or other means of harsh punishment. Prohibition of corporal punishment is a new step in transforming the traditional relationship between teachers and students. Nyi Win Hman (2014) argues that people in Myanmar have great respect for parents and elders and tend to submit to authority and those who with higher social and economic status. As a result, individual concerns and assertiveness to protect individual rights can be pushed aside. Hence, in a school setting where teachers who used to teach Myanmar values and grew up with traditional norms, now have to teach human rights in the recently implemented curriculum. This study reveals challenges teachers face and their initiatives to integrate human rights in their teaching

Research Methods

This study used qualitative methods and collected in two different ways. The first collected material from literature, articles, documents and relevant Myanmar Laws and policies. The second, to understand the relationship between current curricula and human rights concepts, analysed Grade 2 and 3 textbooks to highlight the needs for these to be complemented by teachers’ knowledge of the human rights concept and how this is embedded in the school curriculum. This included analysis of video of training sessions given to teachers. As the transformation of the school curriculum is an ongoing process in the primary education sector, this research is able to address the curriculum as it is in 2020. The

purpose of the interviews is to explore the views of different actors regarding human rights education in Myanmar. A semi-structured approach is chosen to due to interviewees engagement in HRE in Myanmar and knowledge of how human rights education is implemented at national and regional levels.

Table 1: New System of Basic Education in Myanmar

Basic Education (New system)				Transforming Old to New Curriculum by Academic Year	
Academic Year	Age	Grade	Level	Academic Year	New curriculum
2016-17	5	KG	Primary	2016-17	KG
2017-18	6	1		2017-18	Grade 1
2018-19	7	2		2018-19	Grade 2
2019-20	8	3		2019-20	Grade 3 and 6
2020-21	9	4		2020-21	Grade 4,7 and 10
2021-22	10	5		2021-22	Grade 5, 8 and 11
2022-23	11	6	Middle	2022-23	Grade 9 and 12
2023-24	12	7		***Transforming the old to new school curriculum will be completed by 2020-2023.	
2024-25	13	8			
2025-26	14	9			
2026-27	15	10	High		
2027-28	16	11			
2028-29	17	12			

Sampling sites were chosen based on places where different ethnic groups reside and the nature of the development gap between different locations in terms of economic, social and educational opportunity. Mandalay is the second biggest city in Myanmar, in the centre of the country where Burma people are the majority population. Theinni Township is a small township, located in Northern Shan State where ethnic groups such as the Shan, Ta Aang (Palaung), Kachin, Lisu, Ko Kang etc., are the majority population. In economic terms, Mandalay is a major city connected to all other regions and States with good transportation, and with China for the purpose of border trade. In contrast, Theinni is a small town with an economy based on agriculture and where local people are farmers. Mandalay contains both basic and

higher educational institutions, whereas, Theinni township has only limited basic educational institutions.

The research sites are one primary school in Mandalay City and one in Theinni Township, Shan State. Additionally, three interviews with staff of the Myanmar Human Rights Commission (MNHRC) were conducted in Yangon Region since they had knowledge of human rights education and had contributed by submitting the HRE curriculum to the Ministry of Education. Six interviews were conducted with primary school teachers in the two research sites, with the goal of hearing their views and experiences of HRE. They were selected on the basis of age, ethnicity, and working experience in primary schools in Mandalay Region and Shan State. One school head was also interviewed to learn about the HRE implementation process and one interviewee from the township education office that administers schools in the area. Interviews in Yangon and Mandalay regions were made face to face and using group discussion with primary school teachers. Interviews in Shan state were conducted by telephone due to restrictions amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Most informants requested confidentiality, and for these respondents' names and the school location were not mentioned.

Findings and Discussion: Challenges of Implementing HRE in Primary Schools

This study combines analysis of the content of the textbooks of Grade 2 and 3 and the data from the interviews with primary school teachers and other key stakeholders. The findings of this study reveal three challenges in the everyday practices of primary school teachers who are teaching the new curriculum that integrates HRE: a) the teacher's lack of understanding of curriculum; b) a lack of proper training for HRE; and c) teaching resources and language barriers. The findings of our empirical study follow next

A Lack of Proper Training for HRE

The new education system provides two weeks training given by the Department of Basic Education under the Ministry of Education, to support teaching of the new curriculum

prior to the new academic year. In this study, we review the training on teaching social studies, moral and civic education, and life skills from video recorded from trainings provided and interview key informants to understand their experiences and views about the training.

Concerning the objectives and goal of each lesson, neither refer to human rights, neither the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) or The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Trainers did not mention human rights, however trainees were told that HRE is integrated into the curriculum. As a result, teachers are unable to understand the concept of human rights included in the lesson. Most teachers interviewed have no knowledge as to what HRE is. As one teacher recalled; “I was told HRE was integrated into the new curriculum, but I have no idea how the contents and subjects relate to HRE, I cannot explain to you” (Interviewee no. 5, interviewed on 31 March 2020).

The training emphasized new teaching methods rather than the concept of human rights. Primary schoolteachers interviewed all confirmed that the training design does not provide or enhance knowledge of teachers in terms of human rights and human rights education. The new teaching method is designed to enhance students’ participation in class activities, school activities and encourage freedom of expression. The education officer claimed that applying HRE in practice is more important than discussing the concept of the right to participation, as elaborated by the deputy township officer:

At the primary level, there is no HRE expressly mentioned in the lesson, but the teaching method is designed for freedom of expression of the student and the right to participate in class activity. Therefore, we provide for our students to learn HRE by practice rather than theory.
(Deputy township officer, interview on 23 June 2020).

Prior to the education reform, teachers were used to applying teacher-centred methods. Students are expected to obey their teacher whatever he or she says. Acceptance of different opinions from students is not commonly practiced at school. With respect to teaching the new curriculum using new teaching methods, most teachers who participated in this study agree it is good for students to have the chance to express their opinion through the new teaching method (Primary school teachers, Group Discussion on 31 March 2020). However, in practice, teacher’s understanding of the student-centred approach is simply applied as a teaching methodology, not as a means to promote human rights. This teaching method aims at encouraging students to be active learners but the traditional relationship

between teachers and students still discourages students to not express their opinion freely.

Teachers appear to have knowledge of human rights, such as child's rights, but this is somewhat narrow. Teachers in this study think of the right to education as a part of child rights but cannot however articulate a comprehensive concept of such rights. This echoes a teacher who said that; "In my opinion, the child's right is the right to education. I don't know where this right derives from" (Teacher no. 7, interview on 1 May 2020). Often, there were particular incidents that had taken place in the school environment which could be used as a teaching examples about civic education and human rights. Teachers often used such incidents, for example verbal abuse, fighting, or disrespectful behaviour in the school environment, to discipline students, rather than make use of those opportunities to help students explore human rights and empowering students to respect, defend and protect human rights (Teacher No.7, interview on 1 May 2020).

From an HRE perspective, the classroom has to be a safe place for learning where there is respect for all opinions and views. If teachers thoroughly understand HRE they would be able to make use of exchanges happening in classrooms to equip students with human rights by helping them develop attitudes, beliefs and values sensitive to human rights. They can teach human rights when students have different opinions which contradict and challenge each other - including the teacher - as material to teach and inspire actions to promote human rights. If teachers are aware of what HRE is, they could be more adaptive and able to integrate human rights values in to their teaching. Hence, it is crucial to introduce teachers to HRE and human rights concepts especially the UDHR and CRC and localize these concepts to harmonize with the Myanmar context. Teachers could support students to fully enjoy the right to participation and freedom of expression. Moreover, they could be able to link to real-life situations that happen in school on a daily basis to human rights concepts and practice. Gradually they could cultivate a human rights culture in schools. Therefore, HRE training for primary school teachers is an essential part of the implementation of HRE, even though the design of the curriculum is focused on practice rather than theory. The findings discussed above suggest however that theory and practice should go hand in hand.

To summarize, the teachers in this study have limited knowledge of HRE. They do not know about international human rights treaties, such as the UDHR and CRC. Moreover, there is no proper training for HRE specifically and human rights are not mentioned in the textbook or the teacher's guidebook. Teachers are teaching lessons which are related to HRE, and using student-centred teaching methods that encourage the right to participation and freedom of

expression. However, they do not know the term HRE or the concept.

Teacher's Understanding of Curriculum

A close examination of the content in the textbooks of Grade 2 and 3, presented in Tables 2 and 3, suggest it contains no human rights subjects but that this is embedded in the subjects of moral and civic education, social studies and life skills to enhance ethical understanding offered in primary schools. There is no reference to the concept and principles of human rights in the learning goals of each subject or in the teacher guidebook.

Table 2: Contents of Grade 2's Moral and Civic Education, Social Studies and Life Skills

Grade II - Moral and Civic Education		
Chapter	Topic	Aims of the Lesson
1	Respect Parents and Teacher	To become the one who love and respect parents, teachers and elder person.
2	Take care of others who are Younger	To know it is the responsibility to take care of others who are younger and How to take care of them
3	Perseverance	To become the one who is hardworking and perseverance.
4	School playground	To understand and maintain the shared things

Grade II - Moral and Civic Education		
Chapter	Topic	Aims of the Lesson
5	Obey school discipline	To obey classroom and school discipline
6	Polite at school	To act and speak politely
7	Let's decide correctly	Making decisions correctly
8	Effect of sincerity	To become the one who are sincere and faithful
9	Be courteous	To know etiquette
10	Good friend	To respect each other
11	Be Sympathetic	To be sympathy to other
12	Spirit of Fair and Equality	To be able to treat other fairly based on equality
13	Everyone has a duty	To understand that everyone has duty to be fulfil
14	Particular country	To love the country, and all ethnicities in Myanmar
15	Our peaceful world	To value nature and environment
16	Wish for a be clean environment	To make clean environment

Grade II – Social Studies		
Chapter	Topic	Aims of the Lesson
1	Our Classroom	To be able to identify things in the classroom
2	Our School	To be able to do duties and take part in the activities in the school
3	Our School Surroundings	To be able to self-learn about surrounding area of the school and understand directions
4	Our admired Historic Leaders	To admire historic leaders and take them as a role model
Grade II – Life Skills		
Chapter	Topic	Aims of the Lesson
1	No Disease and Health	To be able to do hygiene and get other knowledge of health
2	Skills for Life	Good socializing with friend, avoid accidents, dangerous stranger, and to avoid sexual violence)
3	Preserve Environment and Live Harmoniously	To know the negative impact of climate change

Table 3: Grade 3 Contents of Moral and Civic Education, Social Studies and Life Skills

Grade III - Moral and Civic Education		
Chapter	Topic	Aims of the Lesson
1	Be sympathetic to those younger than you	To be able to take care of others who are younger
2	Polite Guest	To be able to speak politely in communication with other
3	Apply technology properly	To be able to apply IT technology appropriately
4	Person to be Trusted	To know what is trust and why it is important
5	Peacefulness by equality	To know about fairness and its importance
6	Need to understand each other	To be able to understand others' situation and to know the importance of mutual understanding
7	Set goal and Hardworking	To understand how to set goal and work until achieve the accomplishment
8	Selflessly perform for Others	To know it is required to do not only for myself but also for others
9	Be friendly	To understand the benefit of being friend with people around ourselves

Grade III - Moral and Civic Education		
Chapter	Topic	Aims of the Lesson
10	Be discipline	To obey the discipline of school, institution, association
11	Polite at Road/ Street	To know and practice politely at road/street
12	Our place and our duty	To know the responsibility and to perform dutifully
13	Value the common things	To know what is common things and to know how to value them
14	Love the Motherland	To love and value the culture, customs of ethnic in our country
15	Beauty of Nature	To know the living things and natural resources and to conserve them
16	To be a clean and beautiful place	To know how to manage the trash (Reduce, recycle and repair)

Grade III - Social Studies		
Chapter	Topic	Aims of the Lesson
1	Our Town/ City	To explore the differences between nature and social life,(life style) in the particular/urban area
2	Our village	To explore the differences between nature and social life,(life style) in the particular/rural area
3	Compare and study the relationship between regions	To be proud of the participation in the society
4	Our admired Historic Leaders	To admire the historic leaders and take as role model
Grade III – Life Skills		
Chapter	Topic	Aims of the Lesson
1	No Disease and Health	To be able to do hygiene and get other knowledge of health
2	Skills for Life	Good communication with friend, avoid accidents, dangerous stranger, to avoid from sexual violence
3	Preserve Environment and Live Harmoniously	To know the impact of Climate Change

Comparing the national curriculum with the UN approach to teaching human rights at primary level, one can see the difference from the design for the progressive introduction of children to human rights concepts depending on their age mentioned in the UN approach presented in Table 4. In the Myanmar curriculum, most content of the three subjects offered to students in Grade 2 emphasize expected behaviours of ‘good people’ with responsibility to society. There is a clear lack of balance between the emphasis on one’s own human rights and duty to be a good citizen. This actually suggests individuals forgo their rights, become passive and not assertive to protect their own rights when facing oppression, exploitation, discrimination and all forms of abuse and assaults. This contradicts the UN approach of familiarizing children with human rights concepts, where crucial key words of human rights concepts are deliberately highlighted. Notably there is a balance in emphasizing between individual and collective rights.

Table 4: Familiarization of children with human rights concepts - A step-by-step approach

Level	Key Concept	Goals	Specific HR Problems	HR Standards, Systems and Instruments
Age 3-7				
	*Self *Community *Personal responsibility *Duty	*Respect for self *Respect for parents and teachers *Respect for others	*Racism *Sexism *Unfairness *Hurting people (feelings, physically)	*Classroom rules *Family life *Community standards *Universal Declaration of Human Rights *Convention on the Rights of the Child

Level	Key Concept	Goals	Specific HR Problems	HR Standards, Systems and Instruments
Age 8-11	All the above Plus			
	*Individual rights *Group rights *Freedom *Equality *Justice *Rule of law *Government *Security	*Social responsibility *Citizenship *Distinguishing wants from needs, from rights	*Discrimination/prejudice *Poverty/hunger *Injustice *Ethnocentrism *Egocentrism *Passivity	*History of human rights *Local, national legal systems *Local and national history in human rights terms *UNESCO, UNICEF *Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

(Source: UN Human Rights, 2004, p. 17)

The content of the national curriculum for Grades 2 and 3 is framed around respect, notions of equality, humanitarianism, non-discrimination to promote good relationships at family, school, community and society levels, including to promote wellbeing by maintaining good health and environment. These lessons are included in the subject of social studies, life skills and moral and civic education, where human rights are not explicitly mentioned. The curriculum highlights the qualities that should be possessed by a good citizen while explicitly refrain from highlighting individual rights. The Director of MNHRC reflects:

The rights of the child are not clearly mentioned in moral and civic education subjects, rather it emphasizes how to live and to respect in accordance with Myanmar culture. (Dr. Khaing Khaing Win, Director of MNHCR, interview on 18 March 2020).

This is because the objectives of social studies at primary level is to equip students with an understanding about the geographical and history of the country and to develop

Union spirit and nationalism; to be a citizen who can build a peaceful community.³ The curricula emphasize the goal of nurturing students who will become good citizens who are patriotic and can create a peaceful society, which can be in contradiction with human rights values. Some examples will be highlighted.

a) The curriculum emphasizes a concept of kindness which is deeply rooted in Myanmar society. Kindness is based on humanitarianism, refers to selflessness and help people in need. In this regard the notion of equality can be ignored and more emphasis put on being sympathy to people who are for example younger. Being kind means being sympathetic and humanitarian action is based on sympathy not on the rights people have regardless of their age or economic status.⁴

b) Non-discrimination can be found in the lesson ‘Be Friendly’, which aims for students to be able to make friends with others, regardless of race, language, religion or culture. It can also be found in the Grade 3 lesson ‘Need to understand each other’, to be able to make friends with people including children with a difficult family background, or one of financial challenges. Although the lessons seeks to teach the human rights concept of non-discrimination, the purpose of the lessons is mentioned as advancing social skills of students.

c) The way human rights are understood and presented in the new curriculum in Myanmar. For example, the way student should act in the lesson of “Respect Parents and Teachers” reflects the culture of Myanmar. It comes from the proverb “Honour your elders, Respect the same (age) and empathise with the younger”. It seems to have no contradiction with human rights, but in reality, it shapes relationships between older and younger since “the younger must obey whatever the older says and not accept a different opinion”. Otherwise, the younger would be perceived as rude. The curricula emphasize shaping students to become active citizens who respect fundamental values of Myanmar culture and know their duties. Regarding the concept of ‘respect’, the deputy township officer explained in the interview, “It is not founded on the international human rights concept, but is rather totally based on the concept of respect in Myanmar culture” (Interviewee no. 11, interviewed on 23 June 2020).

d) The lessons related to health include parts of human body and how to keep each part of the body clean, to eat three main groups of foods to be healthy, causes of diseases, such as diarrhoea, hookworm disease, dengue fever, and the danger of taking medicine by

³ Social Studies, Grade 3 Guidebook for Teacher, 2019-2020: Mandalay: MRPPA, p.1.

⁴ Compare the principles which should be based on the UDHR and CRC in the UN approach.

oneself. In the lessons related to the environment, the importance of trees and how to make them grow, how to stay safe when natural disasters such as fire, earthquake, heavy rain, flood and thunderclap, occur. Teachers believe that after learning such life skills, students are able to apply them in their daily lives. (Group Discussion with primary school teachers, on 31 March 2020 and phone interviews of all primary school teachers in Shan State, on 1 May 2020). Thus, lessons related to health and preserving the environment refer to the life skills that students should possess at primary level rather than to know the right to health and right to clean environment. In Social Studies, the lesson entitled “our school” is related to the concept of human rights because the lesson aims to nurture students’ ability to know their duties and take part in activities in the school.

To summarize, the curricula are designed to include the human rights concept without explicitly integrating it into the contents of Moral and Civic Education, Social Studies and Life Skills lessons. The intention of his approach comes from a belief that human rights is a part of human relations – the relations between the individual and the society in which one lives – the point where human rights and civic education meet. However, this study has discovered that because the linkage between human relations and human rights concepts are not explicitly highlighted and clarified, the interpretation of human relations depend pretty much on teachers’ worldviews which are highly influenced by Myanmar culture. As a result, instead of empowering students to take responsibility for promoting, respecting and defending human rights, teachers in this study are aiming to develop and shape students to be good citizens who are conforming and obedient to the social order and to existing hierarchy. Students are expected to be able to apply social skills in relation to family, school and community, respect parents and teachers and be able to resolve conflict in society and create peace and be patriotic.

Teaching Aids, Facilities and Language Barrier

The challenges that teachers are facing in their daily life at school are: inadequate teaching aids and small classrooms that do not accommodate a large number of students. Due to inadequate space, teachers complain about being unable to do class activities in accordance with the lesson plan. As a result, they have to reduce the number of activities

which provide for student participation. In all interviews with teachers, they said:

In the teacher's guidebook, it was written perfectly about student centred teaching methods we can use and the timeframe for a particular lesson. However, we cannot teach according to the lesson plan in the guidebook. We have to vary the teaching method and number of periods from time to time. (Group Discussion with primary school teachers, on 31 March 2020 and phone interviews of all primary school teachers in Shan State, on 1 May 2020).

Although study materials and textbooks are distributed to all students free of charge, they are received late in some areas. In one interview, a teacher said: "I wish students could get the textbooks distributed at the beginning of the school semester". (Interviewee no. 8, interviewed on 1 May 2020).

In addition to these difficulties, in some areas teachers have problems communicating with students whose mother language differs from the teacher's and cannot communicate in Burmese as a common language. For instance, a teacher may speak Burmese as a mother language, while a student speaks Shan. A child born as an ethnic Shan, who speaks Shan as a mother tongue, will start to learn Burmese and English at primary school. For such students the language barrier has a negative impact in their ability to understand the lessons. One teacher said:

All I can do is ask for help from other students to explain in his/her language. I hope if we can get training in ethnic minority languages before we are assigned to the area where local people speak an ethnic language. It could help us to communicate with students. (Interviewee no. 8, interviewed on 1 May 2020).

When teachers seek support and help from their head with difficulties related to inadequate facilities, one head said "I support as much as I can, but within the limited budgets, the support received from the school will not be adequate for them" (Interviewee no. 10, interviewed on 31 March 2020). Deputy Township Education officer, formerly a head also said:

When I was a headmaster, I usually had my teachers complain about

inadequate facilities, including classroom size and number of students and number of teachers. I could not fulfil the adequate number of classrooms, and I also could not reduce the number of students. (Interviewee no. 11, interviewed on 23 June 2020)

He continued to explain how he solve the problem of inadequate school facilities as follows:

I advised teachers to teach two classes alternately. For example, while giving an assignment to one class, a teacher can teach the other class. To solve the problem of narrow classroom, I suggest teachers let the students do class activities alternately. This is just for solving the problem temporarily and it is not suitable for a long time period. (Interviewee no. 11, interviewed on 23 June 2020).

According to the teachers' guidebook, lessons related to HRE at primary level are implemented in the classroom using teaching aids and materials such as colour paper, photos, fruit and vegetables, plants, reading poems, and activities including role play. Because of the inadequacy of teaching aids for all students, teachers have to change the teaching methods from those mentioned in the guidebooks. Due to small classrooms, teachers cannot undertake class activities as needed that will affect the understanding of the students. Importantly, there is no handbook on teaching human rights concepts. There is no example of session plan design, activities or case studies with a set of discussion topics with clear explanation with suitable word choice for children, useful for teachers to facilitate activities and discussion in and outside the classroom to equip students with knowledge of and to promote human rights in schools. To avoid an arbitrary interpretation of the lessons based on an individual's worldviews, technical support is crucial to a successful HRE implementation.

Conclusion

There are four important elements that emerge from this study concerning HRE integration in the new curriculum for Grades 2 and 3. First, the HRE related lessons are wisely incorporated into the new curricula by localizing global concepts. Thus, teachers can understand HRE as a subject to develop the 'Union Spirit',⁵ to nurture students to be good

⁵ Myanmar is a union composed of 135 national races, having different cultures, traditions and religions. 'Union spirit' is

citizens and to live harmoniously in peaceful society. Second, there is no clear explanation of the connection between the lesson and the concept of human rights, neither in the teacher guidebook nor the textbooks. The ambiguity of learning goals in the lesson and unfamiliarity of teachers with the HRE concept causes teacher to fail to have a sufficient understanding of the concept. Third, regarding challenges faced by primary school teachers, the study found that inadequate school facilities and support from the Ministry of Education, and language barriers between teachers and students where ethnic groups reside. Fourth, the goal of HRE is to educate students by teaching international human right norms by respecting human rights (in a complementary way between “head” – having accurate knowledge and able to articulate human rights concepts, “hand” – able to design activities and facilitating discussion to promote human rights culture, and “heart” – having right attitude toward human rights and not let Myanmar value to dominate human rights). As such, teachers should be provided proper training for HRE. If teachers do not receive proper training on HRE, the concept of HRE and human rights will be one of the most difficult challenges that primary school teachers are facing.

Therefore, to promote HRE in Myanmar, based on the findings of this study, there are four recommendations. First, curriculum and teacher guidebooks need to be revised to provide a clear understanding of the concept of HRE and human rights. Second, the Ministry of Education should provide adequate materials and facilities on time and the Ministry of Education and teachers should seek available sources provided by international institutions. Third, the Ministry of Education should recruit and allocate more teachers who speak local languages. Finally, the Ministry of Education should cooperate with MNHRC to provide proper training to teachers during pre-service and in-service training which targets not only student-centred teaching methods but also HRE to equip them with knowledge and skills to enhance the effectiveness of HRE implementation.

narrative promoted by the state, indicating the strong determination of all national races to live together in unity.

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