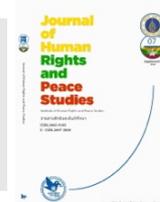




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Implementing Free, Compulsory Primary Education (FCPE) in an Urban Setting in Myanmar: A Perspective on Challenges for and Strategies of State and Non-State Actors in Three Townships of Yangon

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ABSTRACT

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Free, Compulsory Primary Education (FCPE) is a basic human right and if implemented properly, can enhance a country's socio-economic development and stability. This study mainly focuses on the perspective of state and non-state actors on the implementation of FCPE in Myanmar, in three townships of Yangon. It also pays particular attention to the roles of a group of stakeholders, namely education officers at central, district and township levels, parents, parent-teacher associations, and the schools, seeking to know how they participate in fulfilment of this policy. Challenges for FCPE as perceived by these stakeholders are presented in the study. The research employs a qualitative research approach, targeting three schools in different townships in Yangon and selecting 17 state and non-state actors as interview subjects. The study finds that in the three townships the implementation of FCPE seems to run rather smoothly with effective collaboration between state and non-state actors. Schools, in particular, attempt to make sure access to primary education is possible for all children in the area. They cooperate with ward administrations for necessary documentation for children to be able to register at schools and with Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) in creating a friendly atmosphere for students, including providing them with nutritious food. Teachers at schools are also asked to monitor and assist children from poor family backgrounds. Schools also seek to assist children that could not attend school during regular hours by arranging non-formal primary education (NFPE) for them.

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Introduction

Everyone has the right to education. ‘Education’ in this context goes far beyond formal schooling to embrace the broad range of life experiences and learning processes which enable children, individually and collectively, to develop their personalities, talents and abilities and to live a full and satisfying life within society (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC], 2001). Education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities (United Nations Economic and Social Council [UNESCO], 1999a). Education is a foundation for the social, economic and political progress of the state. It provides individuals with the opportunity to improve their lives and enable them to become successful members of their communities and actively contribute to the national socio-economic development.

Starting from the school academic year of 2015-2016, education enrolment is free for high school students in Myanmar. Enrolment in primary schools was made free in the 2010-2011 academic year and the middle schools followed in the 2013-14 academic year. In addition, policies and laws have been enacted as part of the process of education system reform. The most recently enacted laws are the National Education Law of 2014, the Amendment of the National Education Law in 2015 and the Basic Education Law in 2019. The government passed these laws to ensure all children's access to the right to education. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has undertaken a three-and-a-half-year Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) involving three phases: a rapid assessment (Phase 1); in-depth research and analysis of critical sub-sector challenges (Phase 2); and drafting and building ownership for an evidence-based National Education Strategic Plan (NESP), including cost analyses for the Government (Phase 3). Yangon is the main population centre and has many internally displaced persons, and business people and other migrants. Changes in rural areas reflect population movement, degradation of the environment and climate induced migration that has increased in recent decades. Such migration puts a greater burden on Yangon which is largely unprepared to absorb such a rapidly growing population. These factors are important for the purpose of this paper.

Research design and methodology

This is a qualitative study, using data derived from both primary and secondary sources. Documents studied include the National Education Law, Basic Education Law and National Education Strategic Plan, published articles and research journals at international and national level, as well as data concerning enrolment and dropout rates of primary students in three townships of Yangon Region. Additionally, the researcher conducted a number of interviews with relevant stakeholders, including officials from the primary education sector, Heads of schools, parents of students, representatives from Parent-Teacher Associations, and resource persons in the field of education. A total of 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted. A limitation of this study, however, was the accessibility of the official updated data related to enrolment and drop-out rates for the whole of Myanmar, despite requests to concerned departments.

This study attempts to answer three key research questions:

1. What are the challenges to the implementation of FCPE in the three townships?
2. What current actions are taken by the state and other actors in the three townships in advancing FCPE in the area?
3. What are the roles of schools in ensuring the effective implement FCPE in the area?

Sampling

This research used judgmental sampling, partly as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic as a way to reduce health risks by collecting data from a restricted number of people. A total of 17 informants were interviewed, selected to share information on how those implementing the policy saw ways to improve that implementation. Firstly, interviews were conducted by phone with officials from District primary education sectors of and three township education officers. Six interviewees were conducted, each lasting about 30 minutes. The researcher also undertook in-person interviews with selected representatives from Parent-Teacher Associations and Heads of schools from three townships, comprising eight

respondents and also 30 minutes in length. Additionally, three primary teachers took part in 30-minute interviews. Potential informants were gathered to be briefed by the researcher about the purpose and scope of the project and how the interview would be conducted their informed consent and told that their personal details would remain confidential. No identifying details of the participants were noted. Participants were also reminded that they were not obliged to provide information and were free to leave at any point. Individual interviews were conducted in an informal manner in a space that was deemed comfortable for the interviewees, either in schools or common areas. Under Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, there were some challenges for the researcher to interview all PTA members was planned. Due to the limited scope of the study, the findings cannot be considered applicable to all situations and problems for regions beyond study area. In the table are details of the interviewees from the respective sectors.

Table 1 Interviewees profile of officials from Primary Education Sector

Number/City or township	Occupation	Place of Interview & Date of Interview	Age	Sex
Interviewee 1/Yangon Division Basic Education Department	Officer from Primary Education Sector	Yangon (11 May 2020)	50	Male
Interviewee 2/Western District Education Officer	Officer from Primary Education Sector	Yangon (11 May 2020)	45	Female
Interviewee 3/Southern District Education Officer	Officer from Primary Education Sector	Yangon (11 May 2020)	47	Female
Interviewee 4/Thanlyin Township Education Officer	Officer from Primary Education Sector	Yangon (12 May 2020)	51	Female
Interviewee 5/Kamaryut Township Education Officer	Officer from Primary Education Sector	Yangon (12 May 2020)	44	Female

Number/City or township	Occupation	Place of Interview & Date of Interview	Age	Sex
Interviewee 6/Thaketa Township Education Officer	Officer from Primary Education Sector	Yangon (12 May 2020)	49	Female

Table 2 Interviewees' profile of Head of School, Parent of Student, and Representatives from Parent-Teacher Association

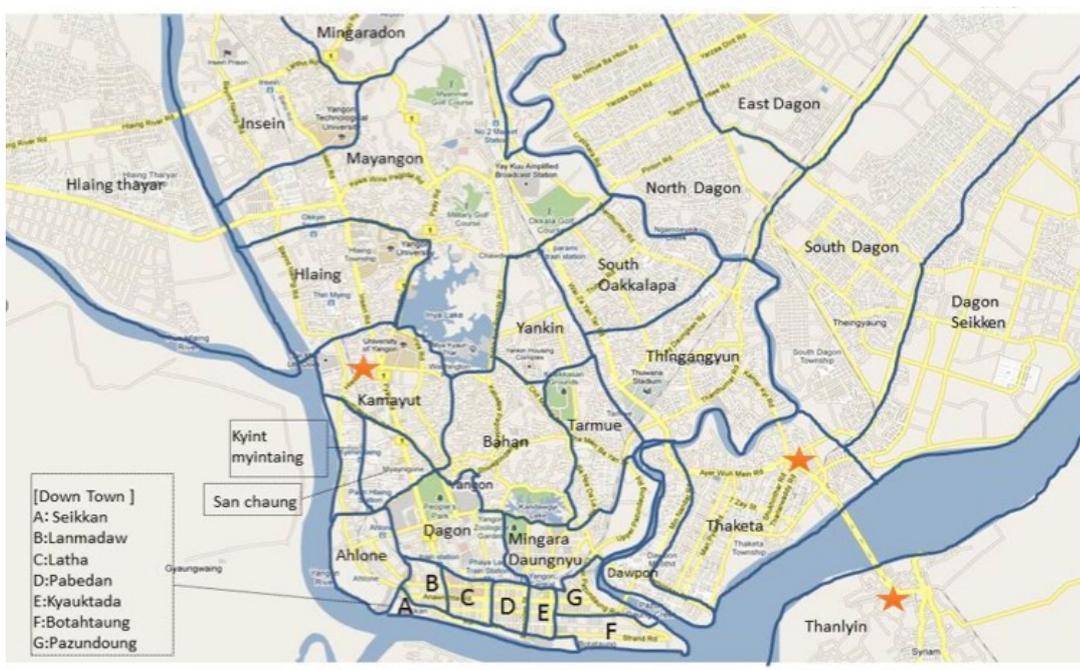
Number/township	Occupation	Place of Interview & Date of Interview	Age	Sex
Interviewee 7 /Thanlyin	Headmistress of School	Yangon (23 June 2020)	51	Female
Interviewee 8/Kamaryut	Headmistress of School	Yangon (23 June 2020)	48	Female
Interviewee 9/Thaketa	Headmistress of School	Yangon (23 June 2020)	55	Female
Interviewee 10/Thanlyin Parent-teacher Association	Farmer	Yangon (23 June 2020)	59	Male
Interviewee 11/Kamaryut Parent-teacher Association	Farmer	Yangon (23 June 2020)	47	Male
Interviewee 12/Thanlyin Parent	Merchant	Yangon (23 June 2020)	35	Female
Interviewee 13/Kamaryut Parent	Civil Servant	Yangon (23 June 2020)	32	Female
Interviewee 14/Thaketa Parent	Housewife	Yangon (23 June 2020)	29	Female

Table 3 Interviewees' profile from the education field

Number/township	Occupation	Place of Interview & Date of Interview	Age	Sex
Interviewee 15/Thanlyin	Teaching Staff	Yangon (23 June 2020)	27	Female
Interviewee 16/Kamaryut	Teaching Staff	Yangon (23 June 2020)	30	Female
Interviewee 17/Thaketa	Teaching Staff	Yangon (23 June 2020)	25	Female

Setting or geographical scope of the study

This study attempts to understand how FCPE is implemented in an urban setting in Myanmar and what gaps and challenges confront such implementation from the perspectives of state and non-state actors. It also seeks to draw attention to issues affecting FCPE in the area and to establish concrete recommendations for more effective strategies for FCPE implementation. The researcher chose three townships of Yangon in which to conduct the study: Thaketa, Thanlyin, and Kamaryut. Interviews were conducted with key state and non-state actors from Yangon and these three townships. All three townships are located in the lower part of Yangon close to ports and with access to the waterways. Their location is strategic and a setting for economic activities.



Adapted from: Yangon map. <https://www.turkey-visit.com/map/myanmar/yangon/map%20of%20yangon.jpg>

The researchers believe that these three townships are suitable as research focused areas for several reasons. First of all, the three bears significant urban characteristics. One key characteristic of urban areas is, of course, the population density. Two of the three townships, Thaketa and Kamaryut, have the density per person/km² at 16,390.1 and 13,039.9 respectively (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2015). Thanlyin is not as densely populated as the other two townships are as it is blessed with the vast land. However, it is also home to more than 200,000 people, the highest number among areas constituting Yangon South region.

Table 4 Population by household type and sex by Yangon

City and township	Total Population	Male	Female	Population in conventional households			Population in institutions		
Yangon	7,360,703	3,516,403	3,844,300	6,949,440	3,258,469	3,690,971	411,263	257,934	153,329

City and township	Total Population	Male	Female	Population in conventional households			Population in institutions		
Kamaryut	84,569	36,958	47,611	72,697	31,107	41,590	11,872	5,851	6,021
Thaketa	220,556	107,290	113,266	212,290	100,834	111,456	8,266	6,456	1,810
Thanlyin	268,063	130,537	137,526	253,923	121,119	132,804	14,140	9,418	4,722

Source: Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2014, pp. 16 -18.

Apart from high number of population, there is another key features setting urban area from its rural counterpart: the existence of urban way of life which characterized by a variety of socio-economic activities engaged by the residents. According to Rapport and Overing (Rapport & Overing, 2000), urban life is filled with diversity; people are not engaged in similar types of occupation and social activities. Residents of these three townships work in various sectors: some are government officials while others are blue-collar workers. All three townships have importance to the socio-economic life of Yangon. In Thaketa, in the eastern part of Yangon Region, there is an industrial zone of factories in which most residents work while others people are engaged in vehicle retailing and wholesaling (Ministry of Labour, 2017). Thanlyin is located in the southern part of the city and is a major port city in the Yangon Region, with most of the population engaged in agriculture and fisheries. Kamaryut is an economic centre in the Yangon Region, with good transportation, and the people of the township are mainly engaged in trade (Ministry of Labour, 2017).

Thaketa township has nine monastic schools, 45 primary schools, one post primary school, nine pre-primary schools, six middle schools, one middle school (branch), one high school (branch), nine monastery schools and six high schools (Township General Administrative Department [TGAD], 2019a). Kamaryut has 11 primary schools, two pre-primary schools, one middle school, three monastery schools and nine high schools (TGAD, 2019b). In

Thanlyin there are 14 monastery schools, 33 primary schools, 1 pre-primary school, 24 post primary schools, 4 middle schools, 4 middle schools (branch), 3 high schools (branch) and 11 high schools (TGAD, 2019c). From these schools the researcher selected one in each of the three townships and interviewed its head teacher, a representative from the PTA (except in Thaketa), a parent and a teacher. School 1 is the Basic Education Primary School (B.E.P.S) No. 10, Thaketa Township; School 2 is the Basic Education Primary School (B.E.P.S) No. 2, Kamaryut Township and School 3 is the Basic Education High School (B.E.H.S) (Pyindaung), Thanlyin Township (Ministry of Labour, 2017).

Understanding the Right to Free, Compulsory Primary Education at International Level and in the Myanmar Context

Education has been formally recognized as a human right since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This has been affirmed by numerous global human rights treaties, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Convention against Discrimination in Education in 1960, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. These treaties establish an entitlement to free, compulsory primary education for all children; an obligation to develop secondary education, supported by measures to render it accessible to all children, as well as equitable access to higher education; and a responsibility to provide basic education for individuals who have not completed primary education (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016).

Neither parents, guardians, nor the state are entitled to treat as optional the decision as to whether the child should have access to primary education. Similarly, the prohibition of gender discrimination in access to education, outlined in Articles 2 and 3 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), is further underlined by this requirement. It should be emphasized, however, that the education offered must be adequate in quality, relevant to the child and must promote the realization of the child's other rights

such as nationality and economic rights (UNESCO, 1999a).

The nature of this requirement is unequivocal. The right is expressly formulated so as to ensure the availability of primary education without charge to the child, parents or guardians. Fees imposed by the government, local authorities or school, and other direct costs, constitute disincentives to the enjoyment of the right and may jeopardize its realization. As such, they must be eliminated. Indirect costs, such as compulsory levies on parents (sometimes portrayed as voluntary, when in fact they are not), or the obligation to wear a relatively expensive school uniform, can also fall into the same category. Other indirect costs may be permissible, subject to the examination by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on a case-by-case basis. This provision of compulsory primary education in no way conflicts with the right recognized in Article 13 (3) of the ICESCR for parents and guardians to choose for their children schools other than those established by the public authorities (Ibid).

In Myanmar, primary education is the first stage of basic education and, in principle, is compulsory. Primary education lasts five years, including one year of preschool education (kindergarten) and is organized in two cycles: lower and upper primary. The admission age is five. It lasts six years and to proceed to the secondary school, students must pass a comprehensive examination of basic subjects after Standard four (UNESCO, 2016). According to Section 2 (p) of the National Education Law, 2014, Myanmar promotes holistic development using appropriate methods for 5-year-olds to ease their transition to first grade. Section 5 (a) of the Basic Education Law 2019 provides that basic education comprises twelve academic years after kindergarten. In addition, Section 7 of this law also designated nine types of primary school, including both public and private institutions, in accordance with Section 5. Moreover, one of the basic education principles is that all citizens complete their primary education in line with their inherent right to education.

Basic education in Myanmar currently consists of five years of primary education, four years of lower secondary education, and two years of upper secondary education. The 5-4-2 structure of the education system is under review and will eventually be replaced by a 6-4-3 structure. Pre-school education is also available, but the pre-school sector is not effectively

integrated with the rest of the education system and only about one-fifth of eligible children attend a pre-school, with children in rural areas being the least likely to participate (Hayden & Martin, 2013). This planned system is more in line with most ASEAN countries. In the planned new education system, the primary school age will be 6-10 years; the middle/lower secondary school 11-14 years; and the high/upper secondary school 15-17 years (Ministry of Labour, 2017).

Right to Education in International Law

Article 26 (1) of the UDHR provides that education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages and that elementary education shall be compulsory. Education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations and racial, ethnic and religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace (**United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights** [UN Human Rights], 1976). States Parties to the ICESCR recognize that, with a view to achieving the full realization of this right: Primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all (Ibid). Primary education includes the elements of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability which are common to education in all its forms and at all levels (UNESCO, 1999b). States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognize the right of the child to education and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1990). In realizing these rights, State Parties of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ensure that Persons with Disabilities can access inclusive, quality and free primary education (UNGA, 1981). The reduction of female student dropout rates and the organization of programmes for girls and women who have left school prematurely should be prioritized (Ibid).

At a minimum, a state party to the ICESCR is required to adopt and implement a national educational strategy which includes the provision of secondary, higher and fundamental education in accordance with the ICESCR. This strategy should include mechanisms, such as indicators and benchmarks on the right to education, by which progress

can be closely monitored (UNESCO, 1999b). The role of the government in education is embodied in seeing the state as the sole funder and provider of education, with the other extreme deeming the state to be only the regulator (Tomasevski, 2001).

Right to Education in National Law

The Ministry of Education is mainly responsible for the provision of basic education in Myanmar. Two other ministries also involved are the Ministry of Religious Affairs (responsible for monastic schools) and the Ministry of Border Affairs (responsible for schools in the troubled border regions of Myanmar) (Hayden & Martin, 2013). Moreover, Section 57 (a) of the National Education Law, Myanmar, 2014 states that administration of schools at the basic education level will be carried out by the Ministry and other relevant ministries. Significant achievements of recent major education reforms include an increase in the budget for education, the publication of a new education law and the removal of public school fees. Starting from the school year 2015-2016, education enrolment is free for high school students. Enrolment in primary schools was made free in 2010-2011 and middle schools followed in 2013-14 (Naing, 2014).

The National Education Strategic Plan has been drawn up for 2016-2021 and nine sectors including basic education, technical and vocational education, informal and lifelong learning, higher learning, teacher training, are in implementation and functioning. In line with the aims and objectives of the National Education Strategic Plan, education policy has been laid down to ensure access to education for all students of school going age; to ensure that no student is excluded from enrolment; and that there are no drop outs in schools. With the creation of new ideas for lifelong learning, the Ministry of Education is working according to the needs of the people during the three-year period of the incumbent government (Yadanar, 2019).

The National Education Law (NEL), (2014) recognizes the right of all citizens to education, and in particular free, compulsory primary education. The law also mandates the establishment of an education quality assurance system, extends the basic education system to 13 years (including a Kindergarten year); allows for the learning of ethnic minority languages

and culture, and the use of ethnic minority languages as a classroom language; provides a definition of, as well as a commitment to, inclusive education and commits to a decentralized education system. A number of other types of non-government basic education schools are also recognized by the NEL. Despite the reform achievements over the last few years the basic education system continues to face major challenges relating to school access, retention, inclusion, equity and quality assurance of education standards. The following three complementary and linked strategies will be implemented to achieve a transformational shift in basic education: Strategy 1: Enable universal access to free basic education; Strategy 2: Support compulsory and inclusive education; and Strategy 3: Improve school quality through a national school-based quality assurance system (Ministry of Education, 2016).

After free, compulsory education has been successfully implemented at the primary level it shall be extended step by step (to higher grades) (National Education Law, 2014). Basic principle of primary education, including free, compulsory primary education, has been implemented at the primary level and will be extended step by step (Basic Education Law, 2019). Increasing access to quality basic education is vital for Myanmar's growth and equity. The Union shall implement "modern education systems that will promote all-around correct thinking and a good moral character contributing towards the building of the Nation" (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008). Every citizen shall, in accordance with the educational policy laid down by the Union: (a) have the right to education; (b) shall be given basic education which the Union prescribes by law as compulsory; (c) have the right to conduct scientific research, explore science, work with creativity and write, to develop the arts, and conduct research freely other branches of culture (Ibid). All children have the right to free education at the schools established by the State under the National Education Law (Basic Education Law, 2019).

The Township Education Improvement Plan (TEIP) was intended to be a key instrument for the decentralization of education planning and management in Myanmar with the following objectives: to enable achievement of the long-term national education plan through its operationalization at the township level; to enable townships to plan and implement initiatives for the improvement of township education services according to the local

conditions and needs; to address disparities in education service provision at the township and sub-township levels through micro-planning processes; and to provide guidance and directions to schools for their school planning processes. The MoE was the main implementing agency of the TEIP project but this did not include provision of funding for TEIP implementation (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2015). In addition to the TEIP project, Non-Formal Primary Education (NFEP) is being implemented by townships level in Yangon Division.

There are currently 47,365 basic education schools in Myanmar with approximately 9.26 million students. The majority of these schools are managed by the Department of Basic Education under the Ministry of Education (MoE). In addition, a significant percentage of student's access basic education through monastic, private, community and schools devoted to ethnic minority education.

Research findings and discussion

Our actors and their awareness of FCPE

It is clear from the data collected that the basic education system of Myanmar continues to face major challenges relating to school access, retention, inclusion, and equity and quality assurance of education standards. In the opinion of informants, these are key challenges to implementing free, compulsory primary education. However, the situation in the three townships namely Thaketa, Kamaryut and Thanlyin is different from the rest of the country. They face fewer issues regarding FCPE than in most regions of Myanmar. Low enrolment and dropping out of schools among students is not an issue in these townships. When asked about the role of the state in implementing FCPE, interviewees working in the government primary education sector stated that they understand that it is the state's responsibility to ensure that all children have the right to FCPE. One notes that the central government has the role to set policies regarding FCPE while implementation is in the hands of officials at district level. Another remarks that each township has the division and officials with responsibility to make sure FCPE is successfully implemented. The answers of these three

state actors reveal that they understand the state role in FCPE implementation. The 10 other interviewees who can be considered as state actors (township education officers, school heads, and teachers) address this issue similarly. They were fully aware of the FCPE and their roles in its implementation.

Parents and PTA representatives in focus schools exhibit a fair understanding on FCPE. Only one parent from Thanlyin mentioned that she does not know about FCPE, although she is not asked to pay tuition fees for her children. Most of our non-state actor interviewees perceive that FCPE implementation in their township is properly carried out as they do not experience any difficulty in having their children enrol at the schools.

Enrolment rates in the three schools and roles of actors in keeping the enrolment rate high

The enrolment rate is used as an indicator to determine how many children are in the education system. The total population is the base parameter used to calculate the enrolment rate (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], 2013). Students register for education at the start of primary and/or secondary education or a given grade year. According to the interviews with township education officers of Thaketa, Kamaryut and Thanlyin (interviewees no. 6, 5, 4), we learn that in 2018-2019 academic year three townships there are over 6000, 3,926 and 20,514 students currently enrolling at primary schools in Thaketa, Kamaryut, Thanlyin respectively. These are overall figures of enrolment rate in the three townships. Our interviews with head mistresses (interviewee no. 7, 8, 9) of the three selected primary schools for the research, school 1 of Thaketa, school 2 of Kamaryut and school 3 of Thanlyin, there are 240, 672 and 1021 students for this 2018-2019 academic year. Comparing these figures from three schools with the overall township enrolment rate figure, we can see that the schools of Tharketa and Thanlyin (schools 1 and 3) only house about 4-5% of the total number of students (4% for school 1 and 4.97% for school 3). School 3 of Thanlyin, however, takes a fair share of 17.1% of the students found in Thanlyin. It is clear that school 3 is bigger than school 1 and 2 and should have capacity to accommodate more students and more teaching staff. It is also learned during the interview that high enrolment rate of school

3 of Thanlyin is also due to the existence of wards or squatters in the township and within the vicinity of the school.

According to the interviews, we have concluded that the issue of enrolment is still not serious in the three townships and in Yangon region as a whole. Interviewee 1 who serves at Yangon basic education department noted that *'Yangon region has the highest enrolment rate in Myanmar'* and although the enrolment rate of southern region where the three townships selected for this study is located and the northern region is not as high as other areas of Yangon, it is considered high as compared to the rest of the country. Interviewee 3 states that *'enrolment rate in southern district increases every year at the average of 99%'* while the headmistress of both school 2 and 3 address similarly that enrolment rate at their schools is getting higher every year.

If low enrolment rate is not a serious issue here, maybe it is worthwhile to look into the situation and see how the state and non-state actors in these three townships contribute to the access to FCPE. First of all, **the state and its actors** who are in charge of this activity have tried to promote the principle of FCPE to all stakeholders. According to interviewee 1, the department of Yangon Basic Education help to enrol the rest of admission student with the coordination of ward administrators and they explain about the understanding of free, compulsory primary education. The government provides textbooks and exercised books at school opening time. They also encourage ward, village and village-tract administrator to admit children of school age to the schools located within the neighbourhood.

The schools in the area also try their best to allow access to basic education for the children. According to our interviews with interviewees no. 7 and 8, school 2 and 3 tend to accept students from catchment area but they also allow students as entry level outside their catchment areas. Headmistress of school 3 states that her school allows no more than 180 students from catchment area to enrol and also welcome students as entry level outside catchment area each year. Tuition fee is also exempted for all students. This also applies to the other two schools. Our interviewees 7, 8, and 9, who are the headmistresses of the schools, also mention the efforts of the school in making access to education a basic right to as many children as possible. Those efforts are their cooperation with 1) ward administrations

for necessary documentations for children to be able to register at schools, with 2) Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in creating a friendly atmosphere for students, including providing them with nutritious food. Teachers of the schools are also asked to monitor and assist children from poor family background. Apart from these actions taken by the schools and its staff, it is learnt from the interviews that the schools also try to assist children that could not attend school at its regular hour by arranging non-formal primary education (NFPE) for them. This NFPE is characterized by teaching after school hour or weekend by teachers. This program is implemented by the collaboration of township ward administrator and the school headmasters. From these information it is clear that the schools have tried to accommodate students and make sure they can get access to FCPE.

Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) also plays a key role in making FCPE possible for children though in an indirect way. Interviewees who are selected to represent PTA in Thaketa and Thanlyin (interviewee no. 10 and 11) state similarly that PTA has helped supporting the school and needy students by giving donations and relief fund for students. Interviewee 4 who is education officer of Thanlyin also addresses that PTA at some schools in Thanlyin do supply lunch box, school uniform, pencil and eraser for those students who are in need. Interviewee 5 notes that there are collaborations between government departments like department of health at the township level, local administrative officers and the PTA in the donation of nutrition food and child basic needs for attending school.

From the discussion above, it is clear that from the perspective of most interviewees there are three parties involve in the implementing of FCPE in the three townships: **state (district office of education), school, and PTA**. It is also worth noting here that most of the interviewees of this study view that parents are the one to be blamed if a child of schooling age do not manage to enrol at primary school. From most interviews, our informants agree that attitude of the parents on FCPE is the key in the success of policy implementation for FCPE. If the parents see the importance of FCPE, it is likely that they will give full support for their children to attend school when they reach schooling age. The interviewee 12 who resides in Thanlyin does not know much about FCPE as a basic human right to all children, although she acknowledges that tuition fee is exempted for her children. It is also learned from the

interviews that sometimes parents have the positive attitude towards FCPE but their difficult economic situation poses constraints on them and make them have their children enter into workforce at young age. Interviewee 6, for example, states that some poverty-stricken parents have to ask their children to work to earn extra income for the family. A conclusion could be drawn from the interviews: **parents need to be equipped more with the knowledge of FCPE, child's rights to education and what type of assistance they can ask from the state department to help their children enrol at primary schools in their areas.**

Dropout rates and links to family economic constraints

There are two crucial issues when we discuss FCPE scenario: enrolment rate and dropout rate. These two issues are related in the sense that the increase in the latter is one of the factors contributing to the decrease of the former. Most of our interviewees mentioned that children's dropping out of schools is one of the key challenges in the FCPE implementation scenario in Myanmar. The family's economic constraint also poses as impediment for a child to successfully obtain FCPE up until the age required. In some areas it is difficult to keep students enrolling up until the end of the academic year for several reasons. This, however, will be discussed later on.

In Thaketa, Kamaryut and Thanlyin the dropout rate is considered low. According to the interview of interviewee 6 who serves as an education officer in Thaketa, there are between 90-100 primary students out of more than 6,000 total numbers of students dropped out from schools. This figure accounts for 1.6% of the total number of students in the township. There is, however, no information on whether these 100 students dropped out and totally leave schooling or they just transferred to new schools in some other areas. Interviewee 5 states that in Kamaryut there are only 8 students dropping out of schools as compared to the total number of students at 3926, just 0.2% of the whole student population. She further notes that the reason why these 8 students resigned from their schools was because they had to move with their parents to new living localities. In Thanlyin, according to interviewee 4 who is an education officer of Thanlyin, dropout rate is also low. There were 147 primary students dropping out of schools in 2018-2019 and 55 primary students transferred to other schools

due to their parent's job transfer. This figure accounts for just 0.98% of the total student population of Thanlyin. Of all the three townships, Thaketa ranks the highest in terms of dropout rate, and then followed by Thanlyin and Kamaryut.

As we look closely at the school level, information gained from interviews with headmistresses indicates that dropout rate of school 1 and school 2 differ sharply from that of school 3 of Thanlyin. In school 1 of Thaketa, an average of 2-3 students will drop out of school with total number of students at 240 persons. In school 2, no student has dropped out during the past academic year. The school also has the lowest dropout rate in Yangon Division. At school 3 of Thanlyin, the situation is different. There are between 50-100 students dropping out of school, usually at the middle of the year. For a school with 1021 a student, having 50-100 students dropping out, which accounts for between 4.8-9.7% of total number of students, is not an alarming rate. However, without a preventive measure based on information on the real situation, this figure could go up until it reaches a worrisome rate.

It is crucial to address here that the dropout rate of school may or may not indicate the situation of Out-of-School student (OOSC). OOSC usually refers to children who leave schools in order to engage in the workforce or not become child labours. In Myanmar, the number of out of school children (OOSC) has seen a remarkable increase. According to the Situation Analysis of Out-of-school Children in Nine Southeast Asian Countries report by UNESCO, during 2006-2011 the number of OOSC in Myanmar was 1,015,340 students and most of them were at the primary level (533,906 students or 52.58%) (UNESCO, 2017). Downtown areas of Yangon Schools lower rates but suburb areas of Yangon schools have faced with high dropout rate. Dropout rate mostly occur children's parents with financial instability and manual labour forces (migrant workers, construction site workers and road repaired workers) for their basic needs in Thanlyin and Thaketa. Dropout rate indicates ineffectiveness of the system. Free, compulsory education is to prevent dropout rate by state and all school-age children cannot complete basic education due to poverty.

Generally, the reason given to the scenario of student dropping out of school is the economic constraints of his/her family. Some interviewees, like interviewee 9, the headmistress of a school in Thaketa, view that lack of encouragement from the parents who

wish their children to help earning extra income is also a casual factor for the dropping out of the students. According to UNDP's Human Development Report by 2016, Myanmar remains one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia, and despite great strides in reducing absolute poverty in recent years, as of 2016 it ranks 145th out of 188 on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2016). Most of the people are odd-job workers who live in one area for a period of time then move to the next one if job opportunities arise. Some also engage in short-time employment and moving to new areas is almost inevitable. Living with this type of parents, the children tend to face difficulties accessing their educational rights. Our interviewees 3 and 4 from Southern district department and Thanlyin education division address this correlation between types of occupation of the parents and the act of dropping out of school of the children. In some poverty-stricken family, children are forced into labour or become street child and vendors. Our interviewee 6 remarks that *'it is the act of the parents that determine whether the children will remain enrolling at schools or dropping out. Some parents want their kids to work instead of attending schools.'*

Primary students have a chance to learn complete basic education and also duty of the complete primary education level which the Union prescribes by law as compulsory (Basic Education Law, 2019). Similarly, parents or guardians of primary students have duty to serve as their children learn complete basic education level; to ensure that no student is being left behind in the enrolment; and enrol to concerned schools (Ibid). According to Section 48 (b) of the Child Rights Law of Myanmar stipulated that right to work for the legal age of child. There are often conflicts between parental preferences for their children's education and the rights of the child, exemplified by the widespread bias against educating girls or children with disabilities (Tomasevski, 2001).

It is also vital to note here another reason for dropping out given by our interviewees is the lack of interest in education among the children themselves. According to interviewee 6, there are some dropping out cases that happen not because of economic constraints of the family. The children themselves are not interested in classes. They probably find schools, classes and lessons unappealing and prefer to spend time at home instead.

Other challenges generally contributing to low enrolment rate, high dropout rate and poor FCPE in Myanmar's context

The difficulty in obtaining birth certification and related documents and access to education

Citizenship is a major issue in Myanmar and the lack of citizenship affects access to several human rights, including the right to education. Without a birth certificate or any form of citizenship document, a child's access to education is impeded because these documents are required by the administrative department at the school application stage. Going through this process before, our interviewee no. 14, a parent living in Thaketa, states that *"parents have to provide a certified copy of the child's birth certificate and family census to the school at enrolment time"*. The interviewee no. 13 who is also a parent from Kamaryut makes the same observation and adds that the school would collect certified copies of a family's house registration paper and birth certificate from students on admission. The interviewee no. 12, a parent from Thanlyin, experienced this issue first-hand when she could not enrol some of her children at state-run schools when she failed to present their birth certificates. *"My children are studying in a monastery school instead"*, says the mother in her mid-thirties. The same parent also mentioned that *"in addition to the child's birth certificate, the school also requires the parent's citizenship card for verification of their parent's name"*. The inability to present a parent's citizenship card would deprive the children of educational opportunity and access to enrolling at government school. Our interviewee no. 13, who is a parent living in Kamaryut and works as a civil servant, witnessed cases she encounters in her line of work. Some people told her that they were unable to enrol at schools as the school authorities did not accept their father's naturalized citizenship card as a valid documentation. When asked what would happen if a prospective student failed to present a certified copy of the family's residence registration paper, birth certificate or parent's citizenship card at admission time, our interviewee no. 7, the head of school 3, said that schools will ask parents to come back with a recommendation letter from the relevant ward administrators. It is

uncertain whether such letter will permit enrolment. It is likely that schools will review cases individually with advice from the education officer of their township.

In Thanlyin where the population is the greatest of all three townships, the citizenship issue is somewhat serious. According to 2014 census, the total population of Thanlyin is 268,063 persons and from this number, 224,169 are of the age to hold citizenship documentation and 62,730 are recorded as being undocumented (Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2014). This figure accounts for 27.9% of the population of the age to hold citizenship documentation. In this township, some people moved from other places and they have no identity cards or family's house registration paper or other documentations. As seen from our interview's data, the school has tried to stipulate to produce birth certificate or recommendation letter from the ward administrator at the enrolment time for the identification of student's data.

Poor FCPE due to large class and high student-teacher ratio

Once the issues of enrolment and dropping out are, the success of FCPE lies in the ability of schools to deliver good education. It is believed that students are likely to benefit more from attending a class with a low student-teacher ratio or a small class than they are in a class with a high student-teacher ratio. This is because in small classes they can get more attention from their teacher and, accordingly, gain a better understanding of the lesson. It should be noted here that in some developing countries where primary education is considered to be of good quality, namely the member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development- OECD, class size is kept small and the student-teacher ratio is low (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). Norway, for example, had a student-teacher ratio at the primary level of 11 in 2011 (Ibid). In Myanmar, a high student-teacher ratio seems to be a challenge at almost every level of education. The ratios of teachers to students are 1:22 at Basic Education Primary Schools in the 2018-2019 Academic year (OECD, 2012). In some schools, the ratio is between 20 and 25 students per teacher. Interviewee 6, an education officer from Thaketa, acknowledged this fact

and notes that the student-teacher ratio varies from one school to another. Examining student-teacher ratios in the schools selected for this study can shed some light on this issue. When asked about the student-teacher ratio in their schools, the interviewees 7, 8, 9 - who are school heads, confirmed that at their schools the ratio is high and class size is always large. School 1 of Thaketa has the ratio of 35: 1 while school 2 of Mamaryut and school 3 of Thanlyin have the ratio of 50-60:1 and 42: 1 respectively. It should be noted that a desirable student-teacher ratio in this period in Myanmar should be about 22: 1 (Ibid). It is clear that at the three schools, student-teacher proportions are imbalanced. This will definitely affect students' learning, the ability of teachers to reinforce discipline and maintain proper class management and result in poor FCPE.

Summary of key findings and recommendations

The total enrolment of primary students in Kamaryut Township is 689 in that the number of females is 307 and males are 382 and the enrolment rate is 79%. The total enrolment of primary students in Thaketa Township is 2220 in that the number of females is 1069 and males are 1151 and the enrolment rate is 96%. In the academic year of 2018-2019, the total enrolment of primary students in Thanlyin Township is 3475 in that the number of females is 1701 and male is 1774 and the enrolment rate is 77%. Township General Administration Department data and Township Education Office data are different regarding the enrolment rate. Thaketa Township is the highest enrolment rate in three township and Thanlyin Township is low enrolment rate. These numbers may differ due to the different way of calculation. The previous numbers received from the Township Education Officer are a bit lower and so as the calculation of the enrolment rate of school age child according to the source of Township General Administration Department (TGAD). This disparity may cause confusion. It is better that in the calculation, the enrolment rates are stated as net enrolment rates, which are calculated by separating the number of students of a particular age group enrolled in primary levels of education by the size of the population of that age group.

Enrolment rates at the three schools are all different with only school 2 having a high

enrolment rate. Dropout rates are largely driven by parents who suffering from financial instability and who work in manual labour. A child's birth certificate must be presented at enrolment in school 3 to confirm the student's data and the inability to present this can be an obstacle for a child to access education. Parents need to ensure the enrolment of all students of school going age, but some want their child to work instead. Students who are deprived of regular education often arrange non-formal primary education including lifelong learning education at school 1. A low teacher to student ratio and a lack of exposure also affects learning and overall student performance. The ratio of teachers to students in school 2 is higher than the other two schools.

All children have the right to free education at public schools under the National Education Law. The National Action Plan (EFA-NAP) 2003-2015 was formulated to ensure that all school-age children have access to a completely free and compulsory basic education of good quality by 2015. None of the three schools studied reached the threshold in enrolment rate despite the adoption of NAP 2003-2015. The Basic Education Law, 2019 enshrined Free, Compulsory Primary Education on the basis of students' and parents' rights and duties, but the implementation of FCPE has not been successful in two of the schools studied. This law shall promulgate the penalty and punishment for not completing primary education.

The primary school dropout out rate is a function of parents' economic and employment situation. The Ministry of Education (MoE) should strengthen school back programmes and technical assistance for children under the legal working age-who are nevertheless working. School 3 has eliminated the collection of civil documentation from parents, which drove a lack of access to primary education and increased dropout rates in this township. The government should expand the National Comprehensive Development Plan (2011-2031) to include all those living in informal settlements and casual labourers, and promote the implementation process in urban areas, including through education and poverty alleviation. The MoE should integrate child labour elimination and prevention strategies into national education policy. Parents or guardians should be required to train and be taught to become better educated human resources, since education is vitally important for the advancement of society and the country's future.

State plans should progressively increase the education budget and ensure sufficient teaching staff in all primary schools, in line with basic education principles and policies. Ensuring that primary schools are available for all children necessitates their being fully funded by the

state. Schools should also enhance programmes, such as extending the Township Education Improvement Plan (TEIP) and non-formal primary education to ensure the adaptability of education for working children in suburban areas in the Yangon region. Schools should encourage the involvement of Non-Governmental and Community-Based Organizations for the effective implementation of FCPE. There is also a lack of effective participatory mechanisms at the local levels to ensure the fulfilment of FCPE. To ensure effective life-long learning and FCPE, schools, parents and the State should work together hand in hand with all stakeholders.

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