

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN MYANMAR

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Abstract

Since 2000, government, non-profit and private sector organisations have delivered preschool services to 3- and 4-year-old children in Myanmar through school-based, community-based, and private preschools. Reliable information is scant due to the lack of a centralized information system for the early childhood education sector. Estimates suggest that, at least before the military coup in 2021, approximately 8.5% of young children had access to some type of preschool (World Bank, 2018). Many more children in urban centres have access than those in rural and remote areas, and few children with disabilities are included. Examples exist of good quality early childhood education that is well suited to the languages, cultures, and resources of local communities, both in school-based preschools and in community-based preschools. However, most preschools are low quality. Many caregivers lack the training to support optimal development, and there is a low level of parent involvement. Inadequate teaching and learning materials and facilities are common. A 2014 Early Childhood Care and Development Law and 2014 Multisectoral Early Childhood Care and Development Policy laid the legal and policy foundations to build the sector using a holistic, inclusive, family involving approach. However, lack of government investment, information, and inter-ministerial coordination impedes equity-targeted scale-up and quality monitoring of early childhood education. While the government has focused on building a modern basic education system for K-12, senior leadership and political will to support early childhood education have been lacking. Political instability in Myanmar has created uncertainty about the functional status and future of early childhood education.

Keywords: Myanmar, early childhood education, multisectoral, Early Childhood Care and Development, community-based preschool, school-based preschool, ECCD policy, ECCD law

1. Overview

The early childhood education (ECE) sector in Myanmar encompasses preschool education for children aged 3 and 4 years old, whether through preschools attached to primary schools or through community-based centres. It does not include kindergarten education for five-year-old children, which since 2014 has been part of the basic education sector. While the chapter addresses ECE as a vital component of the broader field of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD),

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which covers children's care and education up to the age of 8, its focus is the preschool education of children aged 3 and 4 years old.

Development of the Sector

ECE is a relatively recent phenomenon in Myanmar. It was not until 1998 that the Ministry of Education (MOE) first discussed opening school-based preschool classes (or nurseries) for 3- and 4-year-old children. The first of these preschools were opened in 2001. Prior to 2001, local civil society and faith-based organisations were the main providers of preschools and other early childhood services. Early contributors included faith-based organizations delivering a range of services to community members of varying faiths (e.g., Myanmar, Karen, and Kachin Baptist Conventions, Catholic Relief Services) and civil society organizations based in Yangon (e.g., Pyinnya Tazaung Association, Yinthway Foundation, Karuna Myanmar Social Services). Beginning in the 1990s, these groups offered short-term caregiver training programs and parent education. Yinthway Foundation created the first books, instructional posters, and low-cost learning materials for preschools.

In 2001, an ECCD Working Group was formed, including representatives of local and international non-government organizations. In 2008, UNICEF and Save the Children involved this group in responding to the humanitarian crisis occasioned by Cyclone Nargis. Over subsequent years, several civil society organizations formed which, at various times, invested in community and school-based preschool development. The MOE also increased the number of preschools attached to primary schools. Through its Department of Social Welfare (DSW), the Ministry of Social Welfare, Refugees and Resettlement (MSWRR) assumed responsibility for supporting the establishment of community-based preschools in partnership with parents and community leaders, and often with the support of national and international non-government organizations.

Currently, in Myanmar, the MOE oversees school-based preschools, while the MSWRR, through its DSW, manages licensing of community-based preschools and offers training for preschool caregivers. Many preschools are operated by faith-based and community-based organizations, including ethnic education groups, often funded by parents' contributions. Most of these are unlicensed. Many community-based programs lack the resources or information to apply for a licence successfully. In any event, the licensing process is slow because the DSW lacks

sufficient staff members and resources to support inspection visits. It also lacks enough funds to provide the public stipend intended to be given for programs that have been licensed.

In general, reliable data about the sector is either difficult to access or does not yet exist. While there may be a central registry of preschools, this information is unavailable. A 2013 UNESCO report noted that, while the Government of Myanmar recognizes that ECCD was an important public provision, there was no official register of the number of ECCD services available, including various kinds of preschools (UNESCO, 2013). As Ang and Wong found in 2015, this lack of reliable, current data on access to ECE continues to be a key challenge to assessing supply and demand for ECE and disparities across demographic groups. However, it is generally understood that the supply of ECE services in Myanmar is inadequate and lags far behind provision levels in most other Asia-Pacific countries. A UNESCO report in 2014 listed Myanmar as one of 30 countries globally that were “very far from target” in achieving a pre-primary enrolment rate of at least 70% by 2015 (UNESCO, 2014, p. 50). In 2011, a total of 258,235 children, including 95,006 girls and 109,743 boys, were enrolled in either school-based or community-based preschools, yielding a gross enrolment rate in preschool education of only 22.9%, compared with 62% for the Asia-Pacific region (Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, 2011). Yet, reported enrolment data from various sources are contradictory. The number of children enrolled in pre-primary education was estimated at 10% in 2010 and 9% in 2012 (UNESCO 2014; World Bank, 2014). A report by Knoema (n.d.) described pre-primary enrolment as having increased from 2.1% in 1999, to 4.6% in 2007, to 23.5% in 2014, with equal numbers of girls and boys, and private pre-primary programs accounting for 82.1% of all children enrolled in 2014. Varying combinations of kindergarten and preschool enrolment, and public and private enrolment, may account for seeming contradictions.

The ECCD Law (2014)

In 2014, the national legislature enacted an *Early Childhood Care and Development Law* (referred to hereafter as the ECCD Law) (Ministry of Social Welfare, Refugees and Resettlement [MSWRR], 2014). The Law provided a regulatory framework for establishing and monitoring the quality of ECCD services, including school-based and community preschool and day care centres, and home-based services. Chapter 3 of the Law provided for creating a Central Supervisory

Committee for ECCD, comprising senior personnel from the MSWRR, the MOE, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Industry. The Committee was also to include the Chair of the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association and representatives of relevant voluntary organisations. Functions of the Committee were identified as the provision of technical assistance, the extension of ECCD coverage, the formation of state and regional supervisory bodies, the issuance of permits for day care centres and preschools and community (or home-based) service providers, the supervision of service provision, the implementation of a nutrition programme, and the management of an ECCD fund. Chapter 4 prescribed a similar model for state and regional supervisory bodies, which were to have responsibility for providing technical assistance, as well as supervising and coordinating ECCD services. Chapter 6 set out minimum standards for preschools and day care centres. Chapter 7 set out minimum standards for community- and home-based ECCD. Chapters 8 through 10 stipulated procedures for action, appeal, and penalties against non-compliant ECCD providers. However, there is currently no evidence available as to whether this Committee has ever been established or is functional, though some stipulations in the Law were acted upon, such as creating minimum standards for preschools and day care centres.

The ECCD Law created confusion in the sector because a Multisectoral ECCD Policy (Government of the Republic of Myanmar, 2014) (referred to hereafter as the ECCD Policy) was approved later in the same year, with some areas of contradiction between the two documents. For example, the ECCD Law stipulated that an ECCD centre must be registered, and that registration required the centre to have teachers or caregivers who had completed the accredited training. However, the provision of accredited training by the DSW had barely commenced, and the availability of opportunities for training fell far short of the number of centres seeking training. Therefore, few staff in ECCD centres received any training. ECCD centres were also supposed to be levied a registration fee, but most ECCD centres could not afford to pay the registration fee. While the Law was well-intended, it was imposed without warning on an emerging system of ECCD provision that was fragile and lacking in technical and financial resources.

The ECCD Policy (2014)

The ECCD Policy received official approval in 2014. In 2015, a strategic plan for its implementation was developed. The policy development process began in 2012 and involved a steering committee and task force with representatives of ten ministries and 16 organizations, including international and national non-governmental organizations. An external consultant assisted in formulating the conclusions of deliberations among these many contributors.

The ECCD Policy asserted that over eight million children under 8 years old would benefit. Its vision stated that: “From birth to 8 years of age, all children of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar...will receive holistic, high-quality and developmentally-appropriate care in conditions of freedom, equity, and dignity to ensure they will be happy, healthy, well-nourished, socially adept, emotionally balanced and well protected to contribute positively to their families, communities and the nation” (p. 5). This vision was to be achieved by establishing high-quality ECCD services with multisectoral coordination at all levels in the fields of education, health, nutrition, environmental sanitation, and protection. ECCD collaborations included government, non-government, faith-based and community-based organizations, professional associations, foundations, higher education institutions, private sector groups, and international development partners.

To ensure ECCD services were provided equitably, the policy stated that the services offered would be culturally and linguistically appropriate:

The national ECCD system infrastructure will be developed, and quality assurance initiatives will be implemented, including annual program planning and budgeting; service standards and guidelines; high-quality pre-and in-service training for professionals, paraprofessionals and volunteers; comprehensive supervisory systems; monitoring and evaluation activities to assess program outcomes and ensure accountability; timely provision of materials, supplies, feeding and health services; and the development of plans and interventions for children affected by emergencies. (p. 6).

The ECCD Policy aspired to provide universal, affordable, and inclusive preschool services for all 3- and 4-year-old children, including the beginning of transition activities to kindergarten and primary school.

However, little of this ambitious policy has been achieved to date. In the years following approval of the policy, there was no noticeable increase in government spending on ECCD, and, one by one, development partners previously engaged with the early childhood education sector, for example, Save the Children, the Myanmar Education Consortium, and UNICEF, shifted from ECCD to attend to other priorities, leaving PLAN International, Open Society Foundation, World Vision, and Hope International as the primary development partners for ECCD. Even the soundest laws and policies have little impact on outcomes if there are weak governance and delivery systems. As a UNESCO/UNICEF (2015) report on the broken promise of education for all stated: “In some countries, sound policies are in place, but children and schools on the ground see little of the intended effects due to inefficiency, corruption or low capacity at the local and district level” (p. 103). In Myanmar, except for school-based preschools in some primary schools, funding for ECE training, and inspections by the DSW, there is no discernible public investment in ECE.

2. Access

The ECCD Law and ECCD Policy, together with reports by various local and international non-government organizations and recommendations from a Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) launched in 2012, advocated increasing access to ECE, especially for extremely poor and vulnerable children and children with disabilities, as well as increasing demand for ECE, and improving quality. Recommendations encompassing improvements across all aspects of the ECCD sector sought to raise ECCD in Myanmar to standards typical of other Southeast Asian nations. While some improvements were made in the basic education sector following the adoption in 2016 of the five-year *National Education Strategic Plan*, aspirations specifically for ECCD were generally not realized.

However, between 2001 and 2015, some progress was made by MOE establishing more school-based preschools. This strategy was cost-effective because it capitalized on existing school infrastructure, governance structures, and educator experience. In 2009-10, a study found that schools with a preschool attached to them had a significantly higher student attendance rate in

grade 1 than schools without a preschool (UNICEF, 2012). However, the UNICEF report noted that scaling up school-based preschools had followed an equity-based targeting formula. Rural and remote communities without primary schools had not benefited.

A critical issue affecting access in the ECE sector is the language of instruction adopted. The regions of Myanmar with the least access to ECE are also those with the most linguistic diversity. There are at least 135 languages used in Myanmar. Burmese is used in the homes of the dominant Bamar ethnic group, which is most populous in the lowlands, including in Yangon. Non-dominant languages are used by ethnic groups that are more populous in the highlands of upper Myanmar and the border states. However, Burmese is the only official language in Myanmar and is the medium of instruction in the public education system, including in school-based preschools. Thus, many children have not had access to ECE in a language that they or their parents can understand because Burmese is not their home language.

Since 2015, non-dominant languages have been permitted to supplement Burmese in the education system (Bradley, 2016), including preschools. Ethnic communities' self-determination regarding the language of education has been a core issue in ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, including through armed conflict and the development of alternative ethnic education regimes (South & Lall, 2016). Thus, some children in non-dominant language communities have had access to community based ECE delivered in their non-dominant, first language by ethnic minority education bodies.

Currently, it is likely that at least 90% of 3- and 4-year-old children in Myanmar lack access to ECE. Many young children in Myanmar who have the greatest need for quality early childhood services, such as children with disabilities, children exposed to armed conflict, and those living in remote areas, are unable to access ECE. Myanmar trails its neighbours in the geographical distribution of ECE, with most programs concentrated in urban areas where only 30% of the population reside (Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, 2011). The country consistently receives a low ranking in the World Inequality Database on Education, with Myanmar ranked at the same level as Sierra Leone, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan in ECE enrolments (UNESCO, 2014).

Wide disparities have also been noted between urban preschool *attendance* at approximately 39% and rural attendance at about 16%. Across states, attendance rates at

preschools are highly variable, ranging from 61% in Kayah State to 5% in Rakhine State. Nationally, older children are more likely to participate in preschool; the participation rate is 32% for 4- to 5-year-olds, compared with 14% for 3- to 4-year-olds (UNICEF, 2012). Socially excluded groups such as children who are internally displaced due to armed conflict, children whose parents must migrate for economic reasons, and children with disabilities, as well as those in remote areas (often related to being part of an ethnic minority and non-dominant language community), are much more likely to have low attendance in preschool or drop out as their circumstances change. Reportedly, the MOE, with the cooperation of UNICEF, has developed education and socio-economic criteria for the selection of disadvantaged areas for the enhancement of ECE provisions.

In 2015, the Government developed a *National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016-21* (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2016). The plan committed, in principle, to expanding access to quality ECE as an integral part of major ongoing social sector reforms and expanded national economic development. This commitment was informed by the country's international policy commitments, including the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), the *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals* (2015), and *A World Fit for Children* (UNICEF, 2002). Although no data are available, it is generally understood that access to preschool and other ECCD services did not increase significantly during the five-year term of the NESP. Many factors contribute to this, most conspicuously the lack of both senior government leadership for ECCD and public investment to enact strategic plans associated with the ECCD Law and the ECCD Policy of 2014.

Funding of ECCD services is a persistent, significant challenge. The 2014 ECCD Policy mandated the establishment of a Myanmar Fund for ECCD, to be generated from several sources, including development partners, taxes, a national lottery, and private fundraising efforts (Bhandari, 2014). To date, there is no evidence of this fund having been developed. The ECCD Policy also committed the MOE to developing and resourcing a dedicated budget to provide technical leadership for preschool education, expanded preschool education services, and childcare and development services for parents and children from birth to three years of age. Under the auspices of UNICEF, and in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the DSW, technical support has been provided to begin to build an understanding of early childhood intervention services for infants and toddlers, which is one component of ECCD, and was part of the strategic plan for

implementing the 2014 ECCD Policy. Other commitments, such as building human resource capacity for preschool services, have continued through the DSW. There are no available data about whether school-based preschools, which MOE funds, have expanded beyond 2015 levels.

As of 2014, the MSWRR spent approximately 10% of its budget on ECCD-related activities (MSWRR, 2014). These funds were spent primarily on a stipend given to self-reliant preschools licensed by the DSW as meeting the minimum quality requirements. An amount of 30,000 Myanmar Kyat (MMK) (\$30 in U.S. dollars) was provided per school head (or teacher-in-charge). A further amount of 20,000 MMK (\$20 in U.S. dollars) was provided for one caregiver.

The MOE has also incurred expenditure through its support for school-based preschools. However, the extent of this expenditure is not known because the expense forms part of the basic education sector budget. Expenditure on preschools is not disaggregated from the overall school budget, precluding an estimate of the size of the Ministry's investment (Bhandari, 2014).

Although Myanmar is a wealthy country in terms of natural resources, the funding of ECE is insufficient to expand access. There will likely be a limited opportunity in the future to secure more public, partly because of the anticipated high costs of rebuilding the country's economy following the current political unrest. Prior to the military coup, the Government had prioritised implementing the *Free and Compulsory Education Law* and a major expansion of the basic education sector to accommodate the new k-to-12 structure, making increased funding for ECE a low priority.

Without significant public funding or technical resources commitment, ECE financing depends on international donors, non-profit organizations, civil society, and the private sector. Several international organizations, most notably PLAN International, World Vision, and World Concern, support community-based preschools. Save the Children supported the creation of township-level ECCD committees, which assist communities in raising funds and operating their own preschools. The burden of funding community-based preschools falls primarily on parents and communities, which generally has negative implications for quality and sustainability. Parents cover the cost of teachers' salaries, building maintenance and learning materials (except in preschools established and funded by the DSW). Parents may pay \$1 to \$4 per child monthly. This cost is prohibitive for many parents, especially those living outside urban centres. In 2014,

Bhandari reported that the burden on parents to pay for ECE causes many preschools to close. With the growth of a middle class, there has been unprecedented growth in private preschool provision, especially in urban centres such as Yangon and Mandalay. Parents may pay \$20 to \$50 (in U.S. dollars) per child per month in private preschools.

For both the MOE and the MSWRR, a key constraint in developing and successfully applying an equity-based targeting formula to expand access to ECE has been the lack of accurate data on the quality and extent of preschool services currently being provided by primary schools, communities, non-government organizations and faith-based organizations, particularly in disadvantaged areas. The lack of comprehensive information on the range and types of preschool providers prohibits effective planning and governance. Another key constraint is the competing and urgent need to create a modern education system that extends to 13 years (including kindergarten) and uses effective pedagogy and contemporary technologies. To date, the Government has shown little understanding of the foundational impact of providing early stimulation and nurturing care so that children are ready and eager to learn in primary school and beyond.

3. Curriculum

A national curriculum and syllabus for ECE was launched in 2007 (MSWRR, 2007) and endorsed by the National Education Committee in 2014 (MOE, 2014). The curriculum advocates a holistic approach to supporting children's physical, mental, social, emotional, and language development, and to cultivating a love of country and the 'national races'. At the same time, the curriculum promotes children's acquisition of Burmese language, tradition, and culture, thereby reinforcing Bamar social dominance. The stated purpose of the curriculum is to use ECE as a conduit for the development of the country's cultural and national identity. As Ang and Wong (2015) comment, "it would appear that ECCD in Myanmar has taken on an educational, moral, as well as national purpose" (p. 375).

In the absence of regional or central governance and coordination, it is not known to what extent the national ECE curriculum is being followed. Various ECE providers have implemented different provider-specific models of ECE across the country. The only accredited preschool caregiver training program in Myanmar, delivered by the DSW, advocates using thematic 'learning

corners' and having a daily schedule of activities. The author's direct observation of preschools throughout the country suggests that virtually every program posts a daily schedule. Most utilise a thematic 'learning corners' arrangement within the indoor and outdoor spaces. Most programs provide ample opportunity for socialization and free play, including on outdoor swings, climbing apparatus, sandboxes and gardening projects constructed by community members from low/no cost materials. Urban programs tend to have more structured classroom environments and more prescribed, teacher-led activities, using more commercially produced teaching and learning materials.

In general, there is little understanding in Myanmar of child development processes such as self-regulation, oral language foundations of literacy, social skills, print-orientation, or creativity as essential competencies that develop in early childhood and can be fostered in quality ECE. Many ECE teachers, especially in urban centres, aim for rote memorization of the alphabet, numbers, pattern recognition, and fine motor skills. ECE teachers in rural preschools may experience less pressure to mimic primary school classrooms. However, rural, community-based preschools and preschools in poor urban neighbourhoods often have a high ratio of children to teachers and a low allocation of space per child, so that these programs can be noisy and chaotic, which is difficult for young children who may already be experiencing stress due to malnutrition, crowded homes and armed conflict.

As noted, some preschools are operated by ethnic education authorities such as the Mon Education Authority and the Karen Education Authority. These groups prioritize education in their non-dominant language, and some have developed curricula and teaching and learning materials in the local language.

4. Quality

The quality of ECE in Myanmar is highly variable. The DSW has minimum quality standards with 15 indicators covering five areas. These include school and school environment (5 indicators), caregivers (5 indicators), children (3 indicators), parents and community participation (1 indicator) and management (1 indicator). Despite some examples of high-quality programmes, it is generally understood that most programs are of low quality. The low social status of ECE practitioners and their small, often unreliable, stipend or salary negatively affect staff retention.

Community-based programs often close due to short-term non-government organization funding. Despite increasing demand for ECE, poor communities often lack capacity to generate income to sustain their preschool when non-government organizations expect community members to assume financial responsibility for the program. Programs that remain open are dependent on meagre parent fees or in-kind contributions. Teaching and learning materials are typically sparse, and facilities are often barely adequate and need repairs. Beyond site visits by the DSW to programs that have applied for licensing, there is no national monitoring and quality assurance system.

The national quality standards are basic, covering dimensions such as adequacy and safety of indoor and outdoor facilities, minimum staff training, sanitation, and adequate supply of teaching and learning materials. However, many preschools are unaware of the national standards and the steps needed to seek support to meet the standards and apply for licensing by the DSW. As noted, the DSW training encourages a ‘learning corners’ approach that emphasizes children’s choice within specified times in a standardized schedule of daily activities. Trainees are not exposed to other models, such as a Reggio Emilia, Montessori, High Scope, free-play or culturally based approaches, and programs not displaying the ‘learning corners’ set up would be hard-pressed to explain how they meet minimum criteria. However, the variability of program models, settings, schedules, and other attributes, such as parent involvement, could be a strength, given the country’s diverse populations, community resources, and family needs. Yet, variability calls upon licensing officers to understand ECE at a more abstract level, enabling them to interpret what they see in programs to judge whether the program delivers quality. Understanding fundamental principles of ECE is not yet well developed among licensing officers, trainers, and community leaders. As is found elsewhere, there is a conflation of quality with standardization, which typically does not allow flexibility to respond to community goals, circumstances, and the interests, talents and skills of local practitioners, parents, and children.

A survey undertaken for the CESR in 2014 found that 54% of school-based preschools urgently needed quality improvements. Only 18% of 264 non-government preschools had functioning learning spaces and age-appropriate learning materials. Only 15% had a safe, fly-proof toilet per 30 children, used appropriate rubbish disposal methods, and protected children from the dangers of mosquitoes, flies, and other insects (CESR, 2014).

The existing national quality assurance and monitoring system for preschools is inadequate. A CESR survey of 64 community-based preschools in 18 townships found that 32% were visited by government officials (or by staff from other supporting organisations) on a quarterly basis. A further 46% were seen once or twice a year, and 22% received no monitoring visits. The MOE undertakes only one monitoring visit per year to school-based preschools (CESR, 2014). When monitoring visits are undertaken, they vary in quality. The same survey found that while monitors used ECCD basic indicators, they lacked understanding about the various ways these indicators might be manifested and measured, how to interpret and consider the various strengths and weaknesses of preschool teacher competencies, how to discuss these and problem-solve with preschool teachers, parents, and management committees, and how to undertake an analysis and report of the data collected.

Currently, there is no national database that provides senior education managers with a clear picture of the extent to which preschool service providers are achieving government quality standards. While some organisations gather data on minimum standards, these data are not collected centrally and cannot inform national planning decisions. Most preschools do not systematically collect and report data on the achievement of government quality standards. For example, a CESR survey found that 23% of school-based preschools kept accurate records of such vital statistics as the number of children by age, daily attendance, and whether the preschool had a learning observation record for each child (CESR, 2014). A study in 2014 found that data on school-based preschools were not included in the education management information system for basic education (CESR, 2014), and there is no evidence that this has changed. Data on preschool quality regarding nutrition, health, water, sanitation, and hygiene are not consistently available. There are no data collected on the inclusion of children with disabilities, and generally no data on child development outcomes.

Without mandatory data collection on minimum standards, enrolment, attendance, and basic learning outcomes, preschool service providers, including school-based, community-based, and private providers, are not held to account for quality. This lack of accountability creates an enabling environment for providers to engage in unsound or risky practices and offer low value for money for families and communities paying for preschool. Systematically collected and

publicly reported assessment of quality is vital to ensure safe practices and to build the confidence of parents and communities to invest in preschool.

Beyond minimum standards, quality can be assessed through rigorous effectiveness research. There is no research repository on whether children in Myanmar benefit from participation in ECE. One exception is a study in 2020 that compared outcomes of ECE depending upon the length of time in ECE and whether the language of instruction matched the language that children spoke at home (Richards et al., 2020). The study assessed 1,494 girls and boys aged three to six years, using the new East Asia-Pacific Early Child Development Scales-Short Form (Rao et al., 2016). The study found that ECE participation was associated with better child development outcomes compared to children with no ECE participation, and that more extended ECE participation (at least one year) yielded the best outcomes. For children in non-dominant language communities, ECE participation resulted in better outcomes when ECE was provided in the first language used at home. The findings underscore the importance of including language of program delivery as a key quality component. They also indicate that, in Myanmar, it is possible to find teachers with the required non-dominant language skills and communities willing to create linguistically appropriate teaching and learning materials to provide ECE to children in the language they understand, even when this is a non-dominant language.

5. Inclusion and Equity

According to the ECCD Policy, very few children with disabilities, developmental delays, atypical behaviours and chronic diseases receive ECCD services in Myanmar (MSWRR, 2014). Approximately 12% of children in Myanmar are born with or develop physical, perceptual, or functional disabilities. Young children are also negatively affected by chronic illnesses, micronutrient deficiencies, injuries, and toxic stress caused by natural disasters, community conflicts, domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect. Most of these children and their parents, who were similarly disadvantaged during earlier periods, rarely receive social or health services (UNICEF, 2018).

The 2015 amendment of the ECCD Law explicitly mentioned that persons with disabilities should have an equal opportunity to an education, that teacher education programs should produce teachers who can use appropriate methods to teach people with disabilities and that persons with

disabilities should not face barriers to entering the teaching profession. This was the first time in Myanmar that a law mentioned the possibility of employing persons with disabilities as teachers.

Practice with children with special needs is included in the DSW preschool caregiver preparation program and in the post-graduate diploma in ECCD delivered by Yangon University of Education. However, the author's observations of preschools throughout the country are that there are very few children with visible disabilities in ECE programs. Most preschool teachers expressed the view that children with disabilities could not cope with being in an ECE program, as if preschool programs were simply not for them. Many teachers said they would not be able to cope, in part because of a high ratio of children per teacher. They also pointed to the toilet facilities and the preschool entryways as barriers to including children with disabilities. There is also a widespread misconception that the terms 'disability' or 'special needs' refer to children with mobility challenges who use crutches or wheelchairs. One community-based preschool supported by World Vision in Bagan has a special income generation project to create a paved pathway through the sandy compound to the preschool, and a concrete ramp for a child in the community to access the classroom and the toilet. This was a rare example. Inclusion is a new frontier for ECE in Myanmar.

Early childhood intervention is part of the ECCD Policy and is supported by the ECCD Law. The ECCD Policy stipulated that early childhood intervention services would be provided for children up to five years of age who have developmental delays, atypical behaviors, malnutrition, disabilities, or chronic illnesses. In 2017, UNICEF, in collaboration with the DSW, introduced a Myanmar translation of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire-3 as a screening tool to identify children with possible needs for early childhood intervention (ECI). In 2018, members of the ECCD working group and DSW staff received training in screening. Although early childhood intervention is part of the strategic plan for implementing the ECCD Policy, the current focus on ECI is a puzzling shift away from building a rudimentary national ECCD service system for all children, especially those already known to be vulnerable in poor urban neighbourhoods, and in remote, poor, and conflict-affected regions of the country.

6. Teacher Training and Professional Development

“Myanmar lacks a preschool profession” was the conclusion of an ECE capacity gap analysis by a leading civil society organization for ECCD in Myanmar (Pann Pyoe Lett Foundation, 2014). A UNICEF-funded study in 2012 found that 24% of ECE teachers had received no training (UNICEF, 2012). Only 25% of teachers surveyed were found to actively record children's developmental progress (UNICEF, 2012). Only 33% of teachers used age-appropriate teaching methods such as organizing play, problem-solving games, and other active learning activities with children or teaching healthy habits (UNICEF, 2012). Only 42% of teachers were performing key tasks such as: keeping monthly and weekly timetables; preparing weekly lessons through consultation with caregivers; using interesting teaching aids; and holding discussions with parents and caregivers about caring for children (CESR, 2014).

The DSW offers a 21-day (120 hours) preschool caregiver preparation program that is government accredited. Trainees are generally high-school diploma holders. Training is offered approximately 10 times a year, but only in Yangon. The training introduces both the ECCD Law and the ECCD Policy. It also seeks to develop skills and knowledge relating to child development and early learning, observation and lesson planning, art, music and movement, science, and literacy. It introduces special education and early childhood intervention. The training is didactic; there is no interactive, classroom-based, hands-on practice opportunity, and only a half-day site visit to a preschool. As a result, it has been widely reported that ECE teachers cannot apply what they have heard in lectures and demonstrations.

There is an inadequate supply of training compared with demand. The training is inaccessible for rural, remote, and otherwise marginalized communities with a high need for quality ECE. The training is basic and insufficient for developing confident, creative practitioners who could innovate responsive practices for children and families in local communities. Trainers utilize a didactic, lecture-style approach which does not enable trainees to experience or observe the kinds of learner-centred, active learning pedagogies that the 2014 ECCD Policy describes as the future of ECCD practice in Myanmar.

In addition to inadequate supply and inaccessibility of training, a further constraint is the high turnover of staff members required to deliver the training. Trainers may go overseas, for

example, to Singapore, for training, or receive training from international consultants or experienced ECE teachers; however, due to low retention of trainers, there is a continuous need for technical support to maintain even a small cadre of available trainers.

The training takes place in an ECCD Resource Centre located in Yangon. In 2009, the DSW collaborated with the Singapore International Foundation to create the Centre, with about 20 staff, including nine trainers. The two-story building includes three classrooms, a library, a toy lending library, and a resource room. The Centre's effectiveness is undermined by a lack of financial and technical resources. To begin to meet needs even in the area around Yangon would require a quadrupling of the number of qualified trainers, additional classrooms and hostels, an on-site demonstration preschool, and audio-visual equipment to enable the viewing and critical discussion of video demonstrations of good practice using a variety of approaches. As well, most of the library resources are of low quality, consisting mainly of discards from overseas donors, including books that are decades out of date and address topics and recommendations for parenting and programs that are not relevant to the resource constraints and cultures of Myanmar families. However, there is a useful display of learning materials that can be made from low and no-cost materials, and trainees receive a manual on toy-making from upcycled materials.

Other ECE training courses are provided by non-government organizations, including some that the DSW recognizes. Most of these are short term and of widely varying quality. The effectiveness of existing short-term training courses has been undermined by a lack of refresher training combined with mentoring and support. An exception is the early childhood practitioner training offered by World Vision, which extends over many months and includes a ladder approach with successively more advanced training.

A 2014 national *Education for All* review by MOE reported that an Institute of Social Sciences was planned that would offer a diploma programme in ECCD in 2015. To date, this Institute has not materialized.

There is a high need for quality management training for preschool management committees. Reportedly, several training courses have been provided for pre-primary school management committees and parent education facilitators. There is no available information on these training courses or the extent to which they vary between different training organizations.

Apart from the DSW caregiver training, there is no teacher education program in Myanmar specifically for preschool education. Teacher training for basic education occurs at 22 Teacher Education Colleges distributed throughout the country. The author's review of the training curriculum for lower primary teachers in 2018 found that the curriculum consisted of two pages of text mentioning a few concepts attributed to Piaget, Bandura and Montessori. A curriculum has been created for the kindergarten level, which was introduced as part of Myanmar's recent adoption of a 13-year basic education sector program. A certificate and (post-basic) diploma ECE teacher education stream delivered at the teacher education colleges would contribute greatly to the human resource capacity needed to expand and improve ECE throughout the country, while also increasing the status and readiness of preschool educators.

The two education universities, one in Yangon and the other in Sagaing, have yet to deliver undergraduate education in ECE. However, in 2018, Yangon University of Education introduced a one-year post-graduate diploma in ECCD approved by MOE's Department of Higher Education. The 10 modules (or courses) include: child development in ecocultural contexts; learning through play and materials development; approaches to ECCD; working with families and communities; the science of ECD pertaining to children and their families; the science of ECD pertaining to community service systems; needs assessment, monitoring and evaluation; and policy, advocacy, and leadership. The program's goal is to develop practitioner and leadership capacity for the ECCD sector. By 2020, 236 students (all bachelor-degree holders) had completed the program. Most graduates have taken up roles as directors or proprietors of private preschools, and some civil society leaders in ECCD have also completed the program. A scholarship program is needed to increase access to the program by more students likely to work in either the public or the non-profit sectors. The program has also created significant capacity in ECCD among 16 lecturers who, with the support of national and international consultants, prepared for three years to teach the modules and have delivered the program twice. Expansion of this post-graduate professional education opportunity in ECCD to the University of Education in Sagaing would provide access to this leadership development program in upper Myanmar.

Due to lack of access to training and the absence of professional education in ECCD as an occupation, there are significant human resource capacity deficits at all levels of implementing ECE. Staff shortages in government ministries and non-government organizations are common,

and staff deployment is not mapped according to areas of greatest need. A key constraint is the few avenues for developing a cadre of ECE leaders, teachers, parent education facilitators, and management staff. Factors affecting staffing of preschools include inaccessibility of training, low social status, and low salaries (\$12 to \$18 in U.S. dollars per month), although a few educators can earn up to \$35 per month. Low salaries result in high attrition. Also lacking are lecturers in higher education with advanced degrees in ECCD – in 2020, there were an estimated six university lecturers with post-baccalaureate degrees in ECCD or ECE; national ECCD technical experts to train university lecturers; teacher educators and trainers with in-depth ECCD knowledge, skills and experience; accredited, classroom-based, practical training courses for preschool teachers; a competency-based certification system to assess readiness to teach preschool or to work as an ECCD practitioner; and teaching and learning materials that are relevant to childhood in the Myanmar context.

7. Leadership and Governance

The ECCD Policy outlines a clear governance structure for coordination, advocacy and monitoring committees to be established at national, state/region, district, township and community levels. The Policy states that the National ECCD Committee should include ministers, deputy ministers, DGs or deputy DGs of all relevant ministries, including the MOE and 10 other ministries. Other groups mentioned include the Union Attorney General's Office and selected representatives of non-government organizations, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations and foundations, UN agencies, businesses, the media, and ECCD private health and education services (ECCD Policy, 2014). The policy also stipulates the establishment of a National Policy Implementation Institute. These structures were supposed to be established around 2016, focusing on preschool services at the national level and in the target districts, townships, schools, and communities. To date, these structures have not been established.

Lack of effective governance structures at national, state, and district levels has undermined preschool service delivery, resulting in duplicated services in some communities and, more often, lack of services in others. However, in recent years, an Education Thematic Working Group (ETWG) on ECCD has strengthened coordination amongst a range of ECCD service

providers, producing minimum standards and common ECCD training packages and storybooks. In addition, a Myanmar ECCD Network Group at the national level and in some townships has been established to improve coordination and information sharing among different ECCD service providers. Still, these coordination mechanisms are insufficient.

A critical management challenge undermining efforts to plan, coordinate, and budget for equitable expansion of ECE services is the lack of national or state databases with accurate and current data on the quality and coverage of preschool services. While the multisectoral ECCD Policy aims are conceptually sound, the reality in Myanmar is that partnerships between ministries and departments are a novel idea. Also, having several government branches implicated in any initiative can result in confusion and/or a tendency to assume that another ministry is taking responsibility for a set of tasks that ultimately are not carried out by any ministry. Combined with a dearth of data and no effective information management system for ECE, it appears that multisectoral coordination is an aspirational but not yet functional strategy in Myanmar.

Lack of effective preschool coordination structures has made it difficult for the government to effectively: (1) disseminate national policy guidelines on the minimum quality standards for all preschool service providers to achieve; (2) accredit new service providers and evaluate existing providers on an annual basis; (3) undertake advocacy campaigns to mobilise parents, villages, community leaders and local governments to establish preschools in underserved communities; (4) disseminate information on the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders involved in service provision, including parents and community leaders; (5) enlist citizens and other stakeholders across the country to volunteer their time to support their local preschool; and (7) attract and mobilise funding from national and international organisations and private sector organizations to support government efforts to expand access to quality preschool services.

Before exiting the ECCD arena, Save the Children in Myanmar animated the creation of township-level ECCD committees. This has been an effective strategy to strengthen coordination and information sharing amongst a range of local ECCD service providers, increase awareness of training opportunities and new resources, and inform communities about minimum standards. These coordination mechanisms need to be expanded to the district, state and national levels.

Effective leadership for ECCD, including ECE, in Myanmar, resides in the ECCD Working Group, comprised of leaders in local and international non-government organizations that contribute to the ECCD sector. First established informally as a thematic working group in 2002, the Working Group has forged a path for developing the ECCD sector. In 2008, UNICEF and Save the Children recognized the Working Group as the lead civil society representative of ECCD. Subsequently, the goal of the Working Group has been to work collaboratively with key stakeholders to promote strong policy and, after 2014, to promote the implementation of the ECCD Policy and sustainability of gains made in ECCD. From 2013 to 2018, the Working Group gained prominence and, on a few occasions, engaged with the national government in consultations about directions for ECCD expansion and led national ECCD conferences. In the two years prior to the military coup, the Working Group appeared to have been sidelined by government and was not meeting regularly, perhaps because members were struggling to sustain their own programs as financial and technical resources became increasingly scarce.

8. Trends and Key Challenges

Issues of political will, leadership, financial and technical resources, equitable access, quality, and human resource capacity present ongoing challenges for the emerging ECE sector in Myanmar. This concluding section identifies the key challenges and next steps to strengthen much-needed ECE services for Myanmar's many vulnerable young children.

Political Will and Government Engagement

There is a lack of senior leadership available to give life to the legislative and policy frameworks put in place in 2014. The Government has put most of the onus for initiating and funding ECE programs on development partners and communities. Myanmar is rich in natural resources, yet approximately 32% of its population of about 54 million lives below the poverty line (Ministry of Planning and Finance, 2019). It is not clear where the political will required to respond to the high needs of young children resides or where technical leadership can be found. This ambiguity poses the greatest risk to sustaining the gains made since 2000 to establish ECCD in Myanmar and expand the reach of the ECE sector in addressing the needs of a large and growing population of vulnerable children and families. Most countries in the Asia-Pacific region have recognised that ECCD services, including ECE, that combine early learning, nutrition, hygiene,

health monitoring, and medical referrals, and include children with special needs, and actively involve parents, are vital to realizing children's right to live with dignity and equal opportunities to succeed in school and society. Without political will and active government efforts to engage in the expansion of quality, holistic ECE across the country, Myanmar will not attain the standards for young children's wellness and readiness to learn to which other Southeast Asian nations aspire.

Leadership Development

There is a general lack of understanding that the foundation of academic success and lifelong learning is established in early childhood. Government leaders demonstrate little grasp of what ECCD is, including the purpose of ECE as an opportunity for children, including those with special needs, to be stimulated to develop their potential, to develop confidence as learners, and to experience the world outside the confines of their homes. Findings on successful expansion and improvement of preschool in 156 countries underscore the importance of capacity building for those charged with putting policies into practice, including leaders in government, civil society, and non-government organizations (UNESCO, 2006). The post-graduate diploma program in ECCD at Yangon University of Education provides one avenue for government officers and members of civil society organizations to broaden and deepen their knowledge and skills for leadership roles in developing the ECE service system. This leadership training should be extended to Sagaing University of Education to make it accessible to communities in Upper Myanmar.

ECE Teacher Training

Introducing certificate and diploma level professional development in ECE at the teacher education colleges would be timely, as the country is expanding kindergarten teacher training. In many countries, ECE teacher training encompasses teaching children from 3 to 8 years (i.e., ECE, kindergarten, primary grades 1 to 3). A new professional development curriculum based on an active learning pedagogy could contribute to current efforts to bring the education system in Myanmar into the 21st century.

Equity and Inclusion

A diverse and complex profile of disadvantage applies to many young children across Myanmar, with ethnic minority children and those living in remote areas often experiencing

inequitable access to essential services. Key factors that create vulnerable situations for children include lack of access to education, health, and social services; malnutrition; migration (especially seasonal migration for economic reasons); armed conflict; internal and external displacement; natural disasters; and preventable illnesses, including diarrhoea, malaria, and tuberculosis. Expansion of holistic, family inclusive ECCD services, including ECE, can benefit all children, including vulnerable children and children with special developmental needs. Over the past decade, however, Myanmar has seen the expansion of a private economy of ECE, largely based in urban centres where there are increasing numbers of parents employed outside the home and living apart from extended family members who traditionally provided care. A 2012 UNESCO report found that 61% of children enrolled in pre-primary education were in private preschools and kindergartens (UNESCO, 2012). This trend has accelerated with increasing urbanization and the growth of an urban middle class, increasing the gap in access to ECE between comparatively wealthy urban children and poor rural and remote children.

Preschool facilities must be constructed or upgraded to enable access to children with mobility disabilities. Caregivers and teachers must receive more training on the range of special needs and how to adapt activities, materials, furnishings, and facilities to accommodate children needing extra supports into mainstream programs. A study by a leading civil society organization supporting the growth of the ECCD in 2014 concluded that ECCD caregivers, including ECE teachers, must also receive training on children's rights and child protection (Pann Pyoe Lett Foundation, 2014).

Efforts to build capacity for early childhood intervention, while an important component of comprehensive ECCD, divert urgently needed financial and technical resources away from expanding and improving the quality of ECCD to all young children and parents. In the absence of a universal ECCD service system, supporting children who need early childhood intervention will depend upon training individual parents in early intervention through home visiting programs. This will be extremely slow and costly and does not build capacity for the inclusion of children in early learning opportunities for all.

Coordination Among Stakeholders

There is an urgent need to create an effective, efficient and inclusive inter-ministerial body to facilitate national coordination, management (including an education information management system), and partnerships with a wide range of non-government ECE service providers. Experiences in many countries (e.g., Hyde & Kabiru, 2006) show that an inter-ministerial body can promote national coordination of policies and actions (Bhandari, 2014; Shaeffer, 2013).

Education Management Information System

ECE managers in the MOE and the DSW urgently need access to quality data about preschool services delivered by all types of providers across the country. This will inform planning to address current inequities in service provision, especially the concentration of most ECE services in urban centres, far from the population of highly vulnerable children in rural and remote communities. A sound education management information system for ECE would enable evidence-based planning approaches and support efforts to secure government and development partner investments to expand access to quality preschool services.

Communication, Mentorship and Monitoring

Compounding low quality in school- and community-based preschools is weak dissemination of minimum quality standards, low availability of basic preschool ‘caregiver’ training, and a lack of guidelines for management committees. The Government must take the lead to develop, promote, and disseminate an integrated, cost-effective package of inputs to improve the quality of existing school-based and community-based preschools and to establish new ones in the most marginalized communities. Doing so will make it easier for communities, schools, and partners to establish and successfully manage quality preschools. There is a need to develop a quality assurance system and professional training for district and township officers and community members involved in implementing and monitoring national preschool programmes.

Local Expertise

The ECCD Working Group is comprised of the key leaders in ECCD, including ECE, in Myanmar. There is additional expertise within long-standing faith-based and community-managed preschool services. There is also a growing cadre of graduates from the Yangon University of Education post-graduate diploma in ECCD. This in-country expertise can provide some of the

technical support for expansion, quality improvement, monitoring, and evaluation of ECE. Guidance from these practice leaders, with their depth and breadth of understanding of needs and opportunities for ECE on the ground, can assist Myanmar to create an equity-based plan for expansion and quality improvements.

ECCD Resource Centre

The ECCD Resource Centre in Yangon, which focuses on ECE, is a model for a similar centre needed in every state within Myanmar. This kind of centre would be a gathering place for preschool caregiver training, resource and knowledge exchange, and the production of locally meaningful, low-cost teaching and learning materials. At present, the rudimentary training and resource library offered at the centre in Yangon is inaccessible to most of the country.

Community Engagement

Myanmar is driven by top-down management systems, which can miss opportunities to ensure that ECE is relevant and sustainable in local communities. A plethora of civil society organizations in Myanmar are adept at relationship building and participatory decision-making in communities aimed at ensuring that ECCD services, including ECE, are equity-based, culturally meaningful, linguistically appropriate, relevant to locally identified needs and goals for children, tailored to local human and other resources, and paced at a rate commensurable to the local community's capacity to generate income to support quality ECE. It is important, for example, to determine what languages should be used and taught in ECE and recruit teachers who are proficient in the local language(s) of the children (Ball, 2010). Research in other countries has shown that culturally and linguistically appropriate ECCD services can also help achieve peaceful relations among ethnic groups (Ball, 2010; South & Lall, 2016).

International studies demonstrate that investing in ECCD has long-term societal benefits, including less poverty, crime and social welfare spending, and increased economic productivity and competitiveness, tax revenue, and community health (Campbell et al., 2014; Heckman et al., 2007; Rao et al., 2017). The only known, rigorous study of the effectiveness of ECE in Myanmar showed that, compared to children who do not participate in ECE, participation in ECE for at least

one year is associated with better developmental outcomes, especially in language and emergent literacy, providing support for expansion of ECE (Richards et al., 2020).

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