



Early Childhood Education in Myanmar

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Contents

Overview	2
Access	5
Curriculum	7
Quality	8
Inclusion and Equity	11
Teacher Training and Professional Development	12
Leadership and Governance	14
Trends and Key Challenges	16
References	19

Abstract

Myanmar's early childhood education sector was established during the late 1990s, with public preschools first becoming available in 2001. Sector growth was initially slow but had begun to pick up before the military coup in 2021. By 2018, about 8.5% of 3-to-5-year-olds were attending preschool. An Early Childhood Care and Development Law and a Multisectoral Early Childhood Care and Development Policy, adopted in 2014, laid the conceptual foundations for creating a holistic, inclusive, and family-involving approach to early childhood education. However, the sector has been constrained by inadequate coordination and insufficient public investment. Its needs have also tended to be overlooked because of the higher priority attached to redeveloping the school sector. Political instability following the military coup has placed the sector under a cloud. Its future is fragile and unpredictable. Long-term needs include better public financial support, more and better professional development for teachers and caregivers, and an increase in the sector's reach into the rural areas of Myanmar.

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Overview

Early childhood education (ECE) is a relatively recent phenomenon in Myanmar. It was not until 1998 that the Ministry of Education (MOE) first discussed providing preschools for children aged 3–5. Local civil society and faith-based organizations had laid the groundwork for their provision. During the 1990s, civil society organizations, including the Pyinnya Tazaung Association, the Yinthway Foundation, and Karuna Myanmar Social Services, and faith-based organizations, including the Myanmar, Karen, and Kachin Baptist Conventions and the Catholic Relief Services, among others, were providing short-term caregiver training programs and parent education. The Yinthway Foundation had also created books, instructional posters, and low-cost preschool learning materials.

The first MOE preschools began to appear in 2001. They were referred to as school-based preschools because they were attached to existing primary schools. Children aged 3–5 could attend. By 2009, 2272 school-based preschools were serving 50,018 children; by 2014, 4119 school-based preschools were serving 134,319 children; and, by 2016–17, when their number peaked, 5457 school-based preschools were serving 964,896 children (Ministry of Education [MOE] 2016, p. 36, 2020, p. 30).

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Refugees and Resettlement (MSWRR) also became involved with the provision of preschools, though on a smaller scale, and primarily through having responsibility for licensing community-based early childhood centers in partnership with parents and community leaders. These preschools also provided for children aged 3–5. Estimates of the number of children attending vary. By 2018–19, the number appears to have been about 160,000 children (Kirby et al. 2020, p. 13).

In 2014, a new *National Education Law* (MSWRR 2014) sought to distinguish between preschool education, defined as “education for children age[d] 3 to 5 designed to develop their physical, intellectual, moral, social and psychological skills and prepare them for continuing into primary education” (MSWRR 2014, p. 1), and kindergarten education, defined as “education that promotes holistic development using appropriate methods for 5-year-olds to ease their transition to first grade” (MSWRR 2014, p. 2). The distinction was not entirely clear, but the implication was that public kindergarten education for 5-year-olds should become the first year of the basic education sector, hence an MOE responsibility. The MSWRR retained responsibility for public preschools for children aged 3 and 4 and for private preschools, including private kindergartens. The transition of responsibility for all public kindergartens to MoE was not finally achieved until 2017–18.

In general, the ECE sector in Myanmar has been badly neglected. 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). By 2018, Myanmar’s gross enrolment rate in pre-primary education had reached only 9%, which was well below rates achieved by Cambodia (27%), Laos (49%), and Vietnam (93%) (World Bank n.d.). The mid-term review of the *National Education Strategic Plan 2016–2021* reported 88,479 preschool and 892,280 kindergarten enrolments in basic education schools under MoE in 2018–19 (MOE 2020, p. 30). Another 52,895 children were officially enrolled in preschools managed by international nongovernment organizations, and 17,699 children were officially enrolled in preschools supervised by MSWRR. However, actual enrolment numbers may be higher than those formally recorded because, for example, civil society and faith-based organizations in Myanmar operate many unlicensed preschools. The providers include ethnic education groups, often funded by parents’ contributions. There is also often a delay in processing license requests for their establishment because the MSWRR’s Department of Social Welfare, which is the responsible agency, lacks sufficient staff members and resources to support inspection visits. It also lacks enough funds to provide a public stipend intended to be given for licensed preschool programs.

A milestone in the early childhood education sector’s development was the adoption in 2014 of an *Early Childhood Care and Development Law* (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 daycare centers, and home-based services. Chapter 3 of the Law authorized the establishment of 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 organizations. 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 daycare centers and preschools and community (or home-based) service providers, the supervision of service provision, the implementation of a nutrition program, and the management of an ECCD fund. Chapter 4 of the Law prescribed a similar model for state and regional supervisory bodies responsible for providing technical assistance and supervising and coordinating ECCD services. Chapter 6 of the Law set out minimum standards for preschools and daycare centers, while Chapter 7 set out minimum standards for community- and home-based ECCD. Chapters 8–10 of the Law stipulated procedures for action, appeal, and penalties against non-compliant ECCD providers. A national ECCD Committee was established in 2017 (MOE 2020, p. 32). To date, though, there is little evidence available regarding the extent of its impact on the sector (MOE 2020, p. 33).

The ECCD Law gave rise to challenges and some confusion in the sector. For example, the ECCD Law stipulated that an ECCD center must be registered, with

teachers or caregivers having completed the accredited training, but the provision of accredited training by the Department of Social Welfare had barely commenced, and the supply of training fell far short of the number of centers seeking training. Therefore, few staff in ECCD centers received any training. ECCD centers were also supposed to be levied a registration fee, which most would never be able to afford. While the Law was well-intended, it was imposed without warning on an emerging ECE sector that was fragile and lacking in technical and financial resources.

The development of a Multisectoral ECCD Policy (Government of Myanmar 2014) (the ECCD Policy) began in 2012 and was approved in 2014. The process was led by a steering committee and task force with representatives from ten ministries and 16 organizations, including international and national nongovernmental organizations. An external consultant assisted in formulating conclusions from the deliberations of the participants. The Policy asserted that over eight million children under the age of 8 should benefit from the availability of ECCD. It 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” (ECCD Policy, p. 5). This vision required establishing high-quality ECCD services with multisectoral coordination in education, health, nutrition, environmental sanitation, and protection. To ensure ECCD services were provided equitably, the Policy stated that the services offered should 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, para-professionals 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. (ECCD Policy, p. 6)

In summary, the ECCD Policy aspired to provide universal, affordable, and inclusive preschool services for all pre-primary children, including at the point of transition to primary school. However, little of this ambitious policy was subsequently achieved. In the years following the approval of the Policy, there was no noticeable increase in public expenditure 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 attention 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.

Since 2017–18, Myanmar’s government-supported early childhood education (ECE) sector has focused on providing kindergarten education for 5-year-olds. Technically, public kindergartens now belong to the basic education sector.

However, in this chapter, attention will be given to preschool education for 3- to 5-year-olds, which is the focus of nongovernment contributors to the more holistic ECCD sector, along with some support from the government, specifically for school-based preschools.

Access

The ECCD Law and ECCD Policy, informed by reports from various local and international nongovernment 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, including children with disabilities. The Government maintained this commitment in the *National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016–21* (Ministry of Education [MOE] 2016), indicating in-principle support for expanding access to quality ECE as an integral part of major ongoing social sector reforms and expanded national economic development. This approach was consistent with Myanmar's support for international conventions and agendas, 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). However, in practice, little progress appears to have been made. The mid-term review of the NESP reported that access to preschool and kindergarten services managed by the MOE had declined over the 2 years from 2016–17 to 2018–19 (MOE 2020, p. 30). No conclusive explanation was provided for the decline.

However, MOE has made progress since 2001 regarding establishing public school-based preschools. This strategy proved cost-effective because it capitalized on existing school infrastructure, governance structures, and educator experience. A study in 2009–10 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, rural and remote communities without existing public primary schools missed out.

A critical issue affecting access in the ECE sector is the language of instruction. The regions of Myanmar with the least access to ECE are also the most linguistically diverse. 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, the largest city in Myanmar. 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 cannot access ECE in a language 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 basic education sector (Bradley 2016; Salem-Gervis and Raynaud 2020), including preschools managed by the MOE. Ethnic communities' self-determination regarding the language of education has been a core issue in ethnic rebellion in

Myanmar, including through armed conflict and the development of alternative ethnic education regimes (South and Lall 2016). Some children in non-dominant language communities now have more access to community-based ECE delivered in their first language by ethnic minority education bodies.

A significant majority of 3- to 4-year-old children in Myanmar lack access to ECE (MOE 2016, p. 69). These include children with the greatest need for quality early childhood services, such as children with disabilities, children exposed to armed conflict, and those living in remote areas. UNICEF reported in 2012 that 32.9% of 4- to 5-year-olds, but only 13.8% of 3- to 4-year-olds, were engaged with the sector (UNICEF 2012, p. 186). More recent figures are unavailable, but the situation is unlikely to have changed.

Wide regional disparities in preschool attendance rates also exist. UNICEF reported in 2012 that these ranged from 61% in Kayah State to only 5% in Rakhine State (UNICEF 2012, p. 186). More recent figures regarding the percentage of basic education schools with preschools attached also show significant regional variation. In 2018–19, the rate was 29.5% for Mon State and 26.2% for Kayah State, but only 1.3% for Rakhine State (MOE 2020, p. 34). Myanmar trails its neighbors regarding the geographical distribution of opportunities to access ECE. Most preschools are in urban areas where only 30% of the population resides (Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development 2011).

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 3 years of age. Under the auspices of UNICEF and in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the Department of Social Welfare, 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 the national human resource capacity for preschool services, have continued through the MSWRR's Department of Social Welfare, with its limited technical and financial resources.

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 Department of Social Welfare as meeting the minimum quality requirements. An amount of 30,000 Myanmar Kyat (MMK) was provided per school head (or teacher-in-charge). A further amount of 20,000 MMK was supplied for one caregiver. The MOE has also incurred expenditures through its support for school-based preschools. However, the extent of this expense is unknown because it forms part of the budget for the basic education sector. Expenditure on preschools is not disaggregated from the overall school budget, precluding an estimate of the size of the Ministry's investment (Bhandari 2014).

Funding for ECE is insufficient to expand access. Although Myanmar is a wealthy country in terms of natural resources, 32% of its population of about 54 million lives below the poverty line (Ministry of Planning and Finance 2019). There will likely be a limited opportunity in the future to secure more public funding for ECE, partly because of the anticipated high costs of rebuilding the country's economy following the current political unrest. Prior to the military coup in 2021, the Government had prioritized 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 resource commitments, ECE financing depends on international donors, nonprofit organizations, civil society, and the private sector. Several international organizations support community-based preschools, notably PLAN International and World Vision. 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 Department of Social Welfare). Parents may pay US \$1–\$4 per child monthly. This cost is prohibitive for many parents, especially those outside urban centers. Bhandari (2014) 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 centers such as Yangon and Mandalay. Parents may pay \$20–\$50 (in US 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, nongovernment 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 before age 5 so that children are ready and eager to learn in kindergarten, primary school, and beyond.

Curriculum

A national curriculum and syllabus for preschools was launched in 2007 (MSWRR 2007) and endorsed by the National Education Committee in 2014 (MOE 2014). The curriculum advocated 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 promoted children’s acquisition of the Burmese language – prescribed as the medium of instruction, tradition, and culture, reinforcing Bamar social dominance. The stated purpose of the curriculum was to use ECE as a conduit for developing 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 has been followed. Various ECE providers have implemented different models across the country. The only accredited preschool caregiver training program in Myanmar, delivered by the Department of Social Welfare, advocates using thematic “learning corners” and having a daily schedule of activities. Direct observation of preschools across Myanmar suggests that virtually every program posts a daily schedule. Most utilize a thematic “learning corners” arrangement in indoor and outdoor spaces and 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 appears to be a limited 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 a quality ECE setting. Many ECE teachers, especially in urban centers, 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 school-based preschools in poor urban neighborhoods often have a high ratio of children to teachers and a low allocation of space per child, so 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.

Quality

The quality of ECE in Myanmar is highly variable (MOE 2020, p. 30). The Department of Social Welfare has minimum quality standards with 15 indicators covering five areas. These include school and school environment (five indicators), caregivers (five indicators), children (three indicators), parents and community participation (one indicator), and management (one indicator). Despite some exemplary high-quality programs, 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 after short-term non-government organization funding ends. Despite increasing demand for ECE, poor communities often lack capacity to generate income to sustain a preschool when nongovernment organizations expect community members to assume financial responsibility for the facility and the staff. 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 Department of Social Welfare 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 preschool management committees are unaware of the national standards and the steps needed to seek support to meet the standards and apply for licensing by the Department of Social Welfare. As noted, the Department of Social Welfare 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 Reggio Emilia, Montessori, High Scope, free-play or culturally based approaches, and programs not displaying the “learning corners” setup would be hard-pressed to explain how they meet minimum criteria.

The wide variety 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 an abstract level, enabling them to interpret what they see in programs to judge whether the program delivers quality. Understanding the 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.

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 organizations) 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 yearly to school-based preschools (CESR 2014). When monitoring visits are undertaken, they vary in purpose and methods. The same survey found that while monitors used ECCD basic indicators, they lacked understanding of 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.

A survey undertaken for the CESR in 2014 found that 54% of school-based preschools urgently needed quality improvements. Only 18% of 264 nongovernment preschools had functioning learning spaces and age-appropriate 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).

Currently, no national database provides senior education managers with a clear picture of how preschool service providers are achieving government quality standards. While some organizations 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 unavailable. No data were collected on the inclusion of children with disabilities, and little or no data were collected 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 rudimentary quality. This lack of accountability enables providers to engage in unsound or risky practices and offer low value for money to families and communities paying for preschool. Systematically collected and publicly reported quality assessment is vital to ensure safe practices and to build the confidence of parents, communities, and funders to invest in preschool.

Beyond minimum standards, quality can be assessed through rigorous effectiveness research. There is almost no research on whether children in Myanmar benefit from participation in ECE. One exception is a study in 2020 that compared outcomes of ECE depending on the length of time a child spent in ECE and whether the language of instruction matched the language that children spoke at home (Richards et al. 2021). The study assessed 1494 girls and boys aged 3–6 using the 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. More extended ECE participation (at least 1 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. The findings also suggest 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 so that children can attend ECE in the language they understand.

Inclusion and Equity

Inclusion is a new frontier for ECE in Myanmar (Waite 2015). According to the ECCD Policy document, very few children with disabilities, developmental delays, atypical behaviors and chronic diseases receive ECCD services in Myanmar (MSWRR 2014). The ECCD Policy document states that approximately 12% of children in Myanmar are born with or develop physical, perceptual, or functional disabilities. UNICEF (2018) reported that young children in Myanmar 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, and these children rarely receive education, social, or health services.

People with disabilities have generally been excluded from education and employment in Myanmar, including as early childhood educators and teachers (Department of Population 2017). A 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 possibly employing persons with disabilities as teachers.

Practice with children with special needs is included in the Department of Social Welfare preschool caregiver preparation program and in the post-graduate diploma in ECCD delivered by Yangon University of Education. However, as is widely observable, there are very few children with visible disabilities in ECE programs or education at any level (Ko Htay Aung 2020). Many preschool teachers are heard to say that children with disabilities cannot cope with being in an ECE program, as if preschool programs were simply not for them, but also out of concern about large class sizes. They also point 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 is known to have 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 is a rare example.

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 5 years of age with developmental delays, atypical behaviors, malnutrition, disabilities, or chronic illnesses. In 2017, UNICEF, in collaboration with the Department of Social Welfare, 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. In 2018, members of the ECCD working group and the Department of Social Welfare staff received training in screening. Although early childhood intervention is part of the strategic

plan for implementing the ECCD Policy, the current focus on early childhood intervention 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 neighborhoods, and in remote, poor, and conflict-affected regions of the country.

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 creative and social play, problem-solving games, and other active learning activities with children or teaching healthy habits (UNICEF 2012). Only 42% of teachers performed key tasks such as: keeping monthly and weekly schedules; 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 Department of Social Welfare offers a 21-day (120 h) preschool caregiver preparation program that is government accredited. Trainees are generally high-school diploma holders. Training is offered approximately ten 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 there is 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.

In general, there is an inadequate supply of training compared to demand. Training is often 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-centered, 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, there is low retention of trainers, as wages are unacceptably low, and there is a lack of ongoing

professional or career development or mentorship for trainers. As a result, there is a continuous unmet 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 Department of Social Welfare 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, a demonstration preschool classroom, and a resource room. A lack of financial and technical resources undermines the Centre's effectiveness. To meet needs even in the area around Yangon would require many more 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. Also, most 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 Department of Social Welfare 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 program in ECCD in 2015. To date, this Institute has not materialized.

There is an urgent need for quality management training for preschool management committees. Anecdotal reports suggest that several training courses have been provided for pre-primary school management committees and parent education facilitators. However, there is no available information on these training courses or the extent to which they vary between different training organizations.

Apart from the Department of Social Welfare 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. 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 ten 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 aims to develop practitioner and leadership capacity for the ECCD sector. Most graduates have taken up roles as directors or proprietors of private preschools. Several leaders in nongovernment organizations delivering 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 nonprofit sectors. The program has also created significant capacity in ECCD among 16 lecturers who, with the support of national and international consultants, prepared for 3 years to teach the modules and have delivered the program twice. Expanding this program to the University of Education in Sagaing would support ECCD workforce development in upper Myanmar.

Due to the lack of access to training and 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 nongovernment 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 the staffing of preschools include inaccessibility of training, low social status attributed to teaching as a career, and low salaries (USD\$12–USD\$18 per month), although a few educators can earn up to USD\$35 per month. Low salaries result in high attrition. There is also a shortage of lecturers in higher education with advanced degrees in ECCD – in 2020, there were only six university lecturers in Myanmar with post-baccalaureate degrees in the ECCD field. There is a severe need for more national ECCD technical expertise.

Leadership and Governance

The ECCD Policy outlines a clear governance structure for coordination, advocacy, and monitoring committees to be established at the national, state/regional, 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 ten other ministries. Other groups mentioned include the Union Attorney General's Office and selected representatives of nongovernment 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, which were supposed to be established around 2016, focusing on preschool services at the national level and in the target districts, townships, schools, and communities, have not yet been adequately established (MOE 2020, p. 31).

The lack of effective governance structures at the national, state, and district levels has undermined preschool service delivery, resulting in duplicated services in some communities and, more often, an absence of services in others. However, an Education Thematic Working Group (ETWG) on ECCD, established in 2014, strengthened coordination among 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 was established in 2016 to improve coordination and information sharing among different ECCD service providers. Still, these coordination mechanisms are insufficient because they are largely voluntary, only sporadically invited by government decision-makers to provide input about young children's wellness or early education, and lack technical or financial resources.

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 if idealistic, the reality in Myanmar is that partnerships among ministries and departments are a novel approach. Having several government branches implicated in any initiative can result in confusion and a lack of accountability associated with a tendency to assume that another ministry is taking responsibility for tasks that are ultimately not carried out by any ministry, resulting in a lack of progress. Combined with a dearth of data and no effective information management system for ECE, multisectoral coordination is an aspirational but not yet functional strategy in Myanmar.

From this author's experience, the lack of effective preschool coordination structures has made it difficult for the government to effectively disseminate national policy guidelines on the minimum quality standards for all preschool service providers to achieve; accredit new service providers and evaluate existing providers on an annual basis; undertake advocacy campaigns to mobilize parents, villages, community leaders, and local governments to establish preschools in underserved communities; disseminate information on the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders involved in service provision, including parents and community leaders; enlist citizens and other stakeholders across the country to volunteer their time to support their local preschool; and attract and mobilize funding from national and international organizations 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 instigated the creation of township-level ECCD committees. This has been an effective strategy to strengthen coordination and information sharing among local ECCD service providers, increase awareness of training opportunities and new resources, and inform communities about minimum standards. These coordination mechanisms must be

replicated to cover a larger geographic space and scaled up to provide direction at the district, state, and national levels for ECCD sector development.

Effective leadership for ECCD, including ECE, in Myanmar, resides in the ECCD Working Group, which is 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 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 the 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 2 years before the military coup, the Working Group appeared to have been sidelined by government and was not meeting regularly, perhaps because members struggled to sustain their own programs as financial and technical resources became increasingly scarce.

Trends and Key Challenges

For the moment, discussing future trends would be foolhardy, given the fundamental shift in Myanmar's governance structures and processes following the military coup early in 2021. This concluding section is, therefore, mainly concerned with identifying key challenges and the next steps required to strengthen much-needed ECE services for Myanmar's many vulnerable young children. These challenges concern leadership and political will, equity and inclusion, community engagement, and teacher education.

Leadership and Political Will

Myanmar lacks the kind of senior leadership and political will required to give life to the aspirations underpinning the legislative and policy frameworks put in place in 2014. The government has put most of the onus on development partners and communities to initiate and fund ECE programs. It is unclear where the political will required to respond to the pressing 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 recognized 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 be provided with equal opportunities to succeed in school and society. Without effective leadership and government willingness to actively engage

in the expansion of quality, holistic ECE, Myanmar will not attain the standards required for young children's wellness and readiness to learn and thrive.

Underpinning the lack of leadership and political will is a general lack of appreciation 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, develop confidence as learners, and experience the world outside the confines of their homes. Findings on the 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 nongovernment 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.

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 nongovernment ECE service providers. Experiences in many countries (e.g., Hyde and Kabiru 2006) show that an inter-ministerial body can promote national coordination of policies and actions (Bhandari 2014; Shaeffer 2013). This body must have access to quality data about preschool services delivered by all types of providers across the country. These data can inform planning that addresses current inequities in service provision, especially the problem that most ECE services are concentrated in urban centers 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.

Introducing certificate and diploma-level professional development in ECE at the teacher education colleges is timely as the country expands kindergarten teacher training. In many countries, ECE teacher training encompasses teaching children from 3 to 8 years (i.e., ECE, kindergarten, primary grades 1–3). 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 twenty-first 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 diarrhea, malaria, and tuberculosis. Expanding 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 centers 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 special needs and how to adapt activities, materials, furnishings, and facilities to accommodate children needing extra support in 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 for all young children and parents. Without 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 the capacity to include children in early learning opportunities.

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 develop, promote, and disseminate an integrated, cost-effective package of inputs to improve the quality of existing school-based and community-based preschools and 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 programs.

The ECCD Working Group comprises the critical leaders in ECCD, including ECE, in Myanmar. Additional expertise exists within long-standing faith-based and community-managed preschool services. A growing cadre of graduates from the Yangon University of Education post-graduate diploma in ECCD is also available. This in-country expertise can provide some of the technical support for the expansion, quality improvement, monitoring, and evaluation of ECE. With their depth and breadth of understanding of needs and opportunities for ECE on the ground, guidance from these practice leaders can assist Myanmar in creating an equity-based plan for expansion and quality improvements.

The ECCD Resource Centre in Yangon, which focuses on ECE, is a model for a similar center needed in every state within Myanmar. This kind of center 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. Currently, the rudimentary training and resource library offered at the center 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. These relational and empowering approaches aim to ensure 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 commensurate with 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 to recruit teachers proficient in the children's local language(s) (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 and Lall 2016).

International studies demonstrate that investing in ECCD has long-term societal benefits, including less poverty, crime and social welfare spending, increased economic productivity and competitiveness, more tax revenue, and improved community health (Campbell et al. 2014; Heckman and Masterov 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 1 year is associated with better developmental outcomes, especially in language and emergent literacy, providing empirical support for expansion of ECE (Richards et al. 2021). There is an urgent need for government leadership, supported by civil society leaders who have long toiled to develop the ECCD sector, to prioritize the implementation of the 2014 ECCD Policy to realize the rights and harness the potential of its youngest citizens.

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