

Language and Education in Chin State

Myanmar Education Partnerships Project

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→ [Table of Contents](#)

Background of MEPP

Language Education Issues in
Myanmar

An Overview of Chin State

Local Curriculum Content

The Importance of Teaching in
Mother-Tongue Languages through
Local Curriculum Content

Recommendations

References

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BACKGROUND TO MEPP	.....	3
LANGUAGE EDUCATION ISSUES IN MYANMAR	.....	3
AN OVERVIEW OF CHIN STATE	.....	4
EDUCATION ISSUES IN CHIN STATE	.....	4
IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL CURRICULUM CONTENT IN CHIN STATE	.....	5
LOCAL CURRICULUM CONTENT	.....	7
THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING IN MOTHER TONGUE LANGUAGES THROUGH LOCAL CURRICULUM CONTENT	.....	7
RECOMMENDATIONS	.....	8
REFERENCES	.....	9



Table of Contents

→ [Background of MEPP](#)

→ [Language Education Issues in Myanmar](#)

An Overview of Chin State

Local Curriculum Content

The Importance of Teaching in Mother-Tongue Languages through Local Curriculum Content

Recommendations

References



BACKGROUND TO MEPP

The Myanmar Education Partnerships Project (MEPP) – implemented by Covenant Consult and funded by the World Bank and the Myanmar Education Consortium (MEC) – aims to facilitate the development of partnership agreements between the Ministry of Education (MoE) and ethnic education providers in Myanmar.¹ The MEPP first phase (MEPP 1) was primarily research-based, mapping Ethnic Basic Ethnic Providers (EBEPs) across the country, particularly in conflict-affected areas, and identifying barriers and opportunities to partnership between the MoE and EBEPs. Various stakeholders were brought together, in an exploratory and participatory dialogue.

The MEPP second stage aims to facilitate development of a partnership framework between the MoE and key EBEPs.² MEPP 1 focused on bringing different stakeholders together, some of whom within Chin State had never met each other, to allow for participative and communicative dialogue, whereas MEPP Phase 2 aims to facilitate, advise and support the development of a partnership framework for collaboration between the MoE and EBEPs. EBEPs in Chin State are primarily LCCs (Literature and Culture Committees) working in partnership with the MoE (see below) and, unlike in other parts of Myanmar, Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) do not administer independent school systems in Chin areas. If a framework of communication, coordination and cooperation could be designed for a complex state like Chin, the knowledge could be drawn upon to support implementation elsewhere. This working paper provides an overview of the MEPP 2 team's findings in Chin State, particularly, in regards to the implementation of Local Curriculum Content.

LANGUAGE EDUCATION ISSUES IN MYANMAR

Learning ethnic languages in school was not officially permitted under several governments before that of President Thein Sein (2011–2016). However, following the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (Phase 2, 2014), the National Education Law (2014) authorized “curriculum frameworks and standards for each level of basic education, [...] throughout the country” (Article 39f), including “the right for Regions and States to undertake curriculum development, based on the curriculum standards” (Article 39g). Since 2016, the introduction of Local Curriculum Content outlined in the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP 2016–2021, pp. 117–119), allowed for ethnic language teaching in approximately 20% of the curriculum at primary level (initially, until Grade 3) in government schools, stating that “the teaching of ethnic languages and literature can be implemented by the Regional or State governments, starting from the primary level and step by step extending it to higher grades”. Around 30 languages are permitted to be taught in Chin State, and in some Chin areas outside the State including Rakhine State, Bago Region, Sagaing Region, Magwe Division and Yangon Division.

The Local Curriculum Content initiative is an important step forward in acknowledging the ethnolinguistic diversity in Myanmar and developing a more inclusive education system. In practice however, implementation of local language teaching in Chin State is a challenging and often debated issue.

Local Curriculum Content guidelines state that the State or Regional governments are responsible for designing and delivering the allocated lessons in the prescribed timetable. With the initial implementation in five ethnic states, there were five Local Curriculum Content lessons prescribed a week at the primary level and four Local Curriculum Content lessons per week at the secondary level. In the other four States, Local Curriculum Content was divided into three hours of language training and two hours of studying local history, culture, natural resources; or other agreed topics such as information technology or business studies. In the interval between MEPP 1 and MEPP 2 (April 2019 – October 2019), a Union level decision was made to remove local history from the Local Curriculum Content in Chin State.

¹ The aim of MEPP is to form what the NESP [Section 5.2.2] defines as, “a partnership mechanism to support the participation of different education service providers in basic education reforms.”

² For an overview and analysis of the MEPP, see Myanmar Education Partnerships Project, Policy Note (October 2020).

Table of Contents

Background of MEPP

→ Language Education Issues in Myanmar

→ An Overview of Chin State

Local Curriculum Content

The Importance of Teaching in Mother-Tongue Languages through Local Curriculum Content

Recommendations

References



The Union government remains responsible for the final approval of all materials, for funding printing and distribution of textbooks, and paying teacher assistant salaries. Each State or Region is invited to create a Local Curriculum Content implementation group comprised of the State/Regional Minister for Social Affairs, the State/Regional Minister for Ethnic Affairs, the State/Regional Education Director, representatives from universities and/or colleges, District Education Officers, Township Education Office (TEO) representatives, retired head teachers/local experts, and the State/Region Education Deputy Director. Although this list does not specify (LCCs), the authors assume they participate as 'local experts'.

AN OVERVIEW OF CHIN STATE

The population of Chin State is 478,801,³ and has one of the highest levels of poverty in Myanmar. 73% of inhabitants live below the poverty line and 79% of the population are based in rural areas.⁴ The Chin community includes many distinct ethno-linguistic groups. Fifty-three Chin ethno-linguistic groups are recognized by the Myanmar government as members of the "135 national races", but some commentators⁵ believe there are >70 groups or languages/dialects. Most groups have their own LCCs, working to promote language, literature and identity. Historically, LCCs have taught their languages at Sunday School or during the April Thingyan holidays, when permitted by the government, with the majority of literature produced by LCCs translating the Christian Bible and church hymnals. Still today, for teaching mother-tongue languages, LCCs focus on reading, memorizing, and writing verses from the Bible. Having the Bible in their own languages is a source of immense pride for Chin people, and the missionaries who translated the scriptures are highly honored. Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, who developed orthographies and began translating the Bible into local languages,

Chin communities had rich oral cultures, but no written forms of literature. Some of the more-dominant Chin ethno-linguistic communities—Falam/Laizo, Tedim "Zomi" Chin, and Hakha/Lai, among others – do produce local language media, such as newspapers and radio stations.

EDUCATION ISSUES IN CHIN STATE

Several points of interest regarding education issues in Chin State are presented in Table 1.

According to census data, the number of people who complete their education in Chin State is low compared to other states and regions in Myanmar. 95% of primary age children are enrolled in primary schools,⁶ whereas only 67% of middle school age children and just over 40% of high school age children are enrolled.⁷ Chin students have the lowest success rate in the country in annual matriculation exams. During the 2018-2019 academic year in Paletwa Township, fewer than 6% of test-takers passed matriculation. Falam recorded the highest matriculation results in Chin State of 30%.⁸ MoE data on matriculation pass rates from the 2018-2019 academic year indicate that under 20%⁹ of students in Chin State passed matriculation. A 20% pass-rate of only 40% of the population of matriculation-age students means that less than 10% of the population who could take matriculation actually pass successfully. This suggests that approximately 90% of 16-year olds in Chin State are either out of school or failed their matriculation exams, or both. Literacy and education levels across Chin State are especially low for women. Literacy rates of the inhabitants of Chin State are around 70% for females and around 90% for males, compared to the average for Myanmar of 90% (just over 86% for females and nearly 95% for males).¹⁰ Literacy rates vary within the State. For example, in Sami Sub-Township of Paletwa in southern Chin State, barely 50% of women were literate, with an overall literacy rate of less than 70%.¹¹ Literacy

³ Department of Population. (2015)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ro Sang. (2015).

⁶ Department of Population. (2015)

⁷ Ministry of Planning and Finance, World Bank, & UNDP Myanmar. (2018)

⁸ Khonumthung News. (2019)

⁹ BNI online Ibid

¹⁰ Ministry of Planning and Finance, World Bank, & UNDP Myanmar. (2018)

¹¹ Department of Population. (2017).

Table of Contents

Background of MEPP

Language Education Issues in Myanmar

→ An Overview of Chin State

Local Curriculum Content

The Importance of Teaching in Mother-Tongue Languages through Local Curriculum Content

Recommendations

References

**Table 1: Selected educational issues in Chin State**

Category (for Chin State)	Percentage (rounded)
Students enrolled in primary school	95%
Students enrolled in middle school	67%
Students enrolled in high school	40%
Matriculation exam pass rate (Paletwa Tsp.)	6%
Matriculation exam pass rate (Falam Tsp.)	30%
<i>Total matriculation pass rate</i>	20%
Literacy rate (Females)	70%
Literacy rate (Males)	90%

rates for male and female youth, however, are over 90%. The rise in literacy within the younger generation shows an improvement in educational attainment over time with increased gender parity in education. The MEPP team believes that consistent and effective implementation of Local Curriculum Content, with a focus on using the mother-tongue of each child in the classroom, will help more children from Chin State to achieve a positive learning experience and have better comprehension of learning materials taught with the medium of their own language. Once a child has gained knowledge in the language they know most intimately, it is significantly easier for them to grasp concepts in their second language(s). Currently, minority languages are being instructed in Chin State as a school subject through Local Curriculum Content programs, but the remaining subjects are taught in Burmese. The next section provides an overview of the current state of Local Curriculum Content in Chin State.

¹² Funding from MEPP 1. Many local language teachers remain anxious and uncertain, having sometimes not received payment on time.

IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL CURRICULUM CONTENT IN CHIN STATE

Establishing good-quality language programmes hinges on the organization of the recruitment and training/support of qualified language teachers. Each school was initially given an additional 30,000 MMK per month for the ethnic language teachers - an amount which has been increased to pay for all teachers recruited in subsequent academic years.¹² Intended to support the Local Curriculum Content, local Language Teachers (LT) or Teaching Assistants (TA) are often required to teach many different subjects. LTs and TAs are generally drawn from the community, and usually are nominated by LCCs (see below). Nevertheless, some of these LTs and TAs may not be fully literate in their mother-tongue, but only in a similar language or in Burmese. The LTs and TAs may not have access to appropriate training for formal language instruction, especially as many Lts currently working have not finished their own schooling. Furthermore, in many remote areas ethnic languages continue to be taught outside of school hours despite the new policies. There are already recruitment criteria set in place for hiring TAs, but no



Table of Contents

Background of MEPP

Language Education Issues in Myanmar

→ An Overview of Chin State

Local Curriculum Content

The Importance of Teaching in Mother-Tongue Languages through Local Curriculum Content

Recommendations

References



criteria have been developed as of yet for hiring LTs. It is not feasible to hire a large number of TAs for each language group under the current criteria, because in many villages in Chin State few (in some cases, none) of the locally available teachers have completed high school. For the LTs there is a considerable amount of uncertainty regarding employment opportunities. No hiring criteria are publicly available and many applicants presented by their LCCs as candidates for employment are not approved by the MoE/MoEA, because they were not trained, and there is currently no training for them. Absent or poorly communicated employment policies can generate unintended conflicts between the LTs and the LCCs, and by extension with the MoE and MoEA. Some LCCs told of how the mismanagement of the LT and TA recruitment process resulted in language classes being taught by MoE teachers in search of extra salary, who could not even speak the local languages. In regards to the textbooks, most teaching materials used for Local Curriculum Content in Chin State and in other ethnic areas in Myanmar are direct translations from Myanmar (Burmese) language textbooks, rather than naturally-produced texts from a local perspective.

Implementing the local curriculum in Chin State is also challenging, due to the sociocultural structure of Chin State. In one instance, funding was given to develop early childhood Curriculum Content (ECCD) teaching materials in many different local languages - but there is limited information publicly available regarding how Chin languages and LCCs were selected for support. A community leader and a politician¹³ interviewed in Falam said that the community was concerned about how different minority languages in Falam were being financially supported, as this undermined Falam Laizo as the main language of wider communication,¹⁴ and could possibly damage community cohesion in Falam township; he felt it would have been beneficial to develop materials for just one common language, for general use at the township level. He felt the LCCs in Falam had not been consulted and that books were simply distributed with no consideration of any cultural or local implications.

¹³ Edwards, N. (2017).

¹⁴ This term is synonymous with lingua franca.

¹⁵ Zaw Latt Tun. (2019).

However, this would have further marginalised less well-resourced sub-groups in the township. Having observed developments in nearby Falam, the Lai Hakha Literature Culture Committee initiated a campaign to develop Lai Hakha ECCD books, but no books for other actively-spoken languages in Hakha Township, such as Lautu or Zophei (Zyphe). Such debates and disputes illustrate the complexities of implementing Local Curriculum Content in Chin State.

A key discourse encountered in the research is: "which languages will have their own local curriculum" given the language complexities. Since the 2016-2017 school year, the Chin State MoE worked with the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs (MoEA), LCCs and UNICEF to facilitate the process of implementing LCC in Chin State. LCCs put their languages forward for approval at the State level, then translated MoE materials into their languages and sent the materials to the National Curriculum Committee in Nay Pyi Taw for approval.¹⁵ Initially, all language groups who applied for LCC inclusion were granted permission to teach in government schools by MoE Chin State and the MoEA in Nay Pyi Taw. However, after more than 25 language groups had successfully applied, other languages were no longer allowed to apply. The selection criteria and inclusion of ethnic languages in the curriculum was handled on a "first come-first served" basis.¹⁶ Consequently, MoE were frustrated by the large number of Chin languages making it difficult to manage implementation of local curriculum effectively. As a result, the languages officially approved for teaching were not necessarily the most widely-spoken languages in those communities, but rather those with the most active advocates. Several participants in the workshops held (see below) complained that a 'small' language had permission to be taught, while their own language/dialect was not approved, despite being one of the most common in the school or area. In Kanpetlet for example, several languages are spoken by substantial proportions of the population, while only five were selected for inclusion in the Local Curriculum Content.¹⁷ Similarly, in Northern Chin smaller language groups complained of being left out

¹⁶ The languages permitted to teach in Chin schools were those of the promptest Language and Culture Committees to respond to the application and send translations of materials to NPT.

¹⁷ MEPP Phase 1 and 2



Table of Contents

Background of MEPP

Language Education Issues in
Myanmar

An Overview of Chin State

→ Local Curriculum Content

→ The Importance of Teaching in
Mother-Tongue Languages through
Local Curriculum Content

Recommendations

References



of the processes and excluded, with the powerful Lai Hakha groups demanding that no other languages be given permission to be taught. In Hakha Township the Lai Hakha LCC was successful in becoming the only language to be taught, but in Thantlang, some smaller language groups managed to obtain permission to teach their languages in schools.

LOCAL CURRICULUM CONTENT

In MEPP 2, the Chin team delivered a series of 5 workshops with Chin LCCs. This culminated in the first-ever Chin Education Forum held in Hakha on 8 November 2019. The Chin Education Forum was attended by 90 people from the MoE, MoEA, Chin State government, LCCs and selected individuals. In total, the MEPP team met with representatives of 35 different language groups, over 240 people from all 9 Townships, and community representatives outside of Chin State. During these workshops, government officials clearly recognized the strengths and the commitment of the LCCs and expressed appreciation for the LCCs' commitment to mother-tongue education and improving educational outcomes for children.

Clarification on local curriculum teacher qualifications and career advancements trajectories are essential. There are concerns linked to the lack of clarity on professional development and recognition of local language teachers. The local language is being taught in some cases by LTs, and in other cases by TAs. Many LTs and TAs receive no teacher training, which has negative effects on the quality of the education that can be provided.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING IN MOTHER-TONGUE LANGUAGES THROUGH LOCAL CURRICULUM CONTENT

Several language communities in Chin State are capable of developing Local Curriculum Content, due to their historic experiences in preserving their heritage languages and cultures, and due to existing infrastructure which allows for the existence of LCCs. Chin State differs from the other ethnic states where MEPP is working (in southeast Myanmar), because there is no Ethnic Armed Organization (AO) in the state delivering education services

independent of the government. The main local education delivery organizations are LCCs, and not AO-based education departments.

To improve implementation of Local Curriculum Content, schools need to make allowance for unique classrooms or staggered timetables, the capacity to write and translate various academic subject materials, the capacity to teach the local curriculum, and the capacity to develop ethnic language teaching materials. The priority must first be continuing to support the success of Local Curriculum Content delivered in children's mother-tongue, by promoting teacher training and improving the quality of education available, and analyzing the needs for languages in areas to prioritize resources.

Enabling children to learn their mother-tongue supports and enhances their cognitive development¹⁸, and therefore should contribute to improving learning outcomes and inclusiveness of the national education system, alongside better meeting "quality education for all" targets as outlined in relevant government laws and policies. Success in language teaching in Chin and other states would also support the peace process, through demonstrating respect and support for minority communities' cultures and languages - thus addressing one of the main grievances of ethnic nationality communities in Myanmar: that their languages and cultures have been marginalized and excluded from state education.

In the longer term, there is a need for the technical capacity to write or translate existing curricula across all subject areas for each languages, even at the primary level. Some languages within Chin State do not have technical vocabulary and thus have to borrow a lot of terminology from Burmese or from English. LCCs would have to discuss amongst themselves how they could create detailed classroom materials in their languages for the necessary terminology and whether using borrowed words during translation would be an issue for the language community.

¹⁸ The main benefits of children learning in their mother-tongue may be summarized as follows: "(1) high levels of multilingualism; (2) a fair chance of achieving academically at school; and (3) strong, positive multilingual and multicultural identity and positive attitudes toward self and others" (Skutnabb-Kangas, T., 1999, p.42).



Table of Contents

Background of MEPP

Language Education Issues in
Myanmar

An Overview of Chin State

Local Curriculum Content

→ **The Importance of Teaching in
Mother-Tongue Languages through
Local Curriculum Content**

→ **Recommendations**

References



If Chin mother-tongues are successfully taught in schools as part of Local Curriculum Content, starting first with grades 1-3, this could be later extended up to high school, with improved teaching quality across the whole Chin State, the education of all Chin children would improve immensely. There is a spectrum of strong opinions regarding which Chin languages to teach in schools. Some stakeholders advocate teaching the full range of local languages. However, there are different agendas, with some advocates promoting preservation of identity and culture and others promoting the educational benefits of becoming literate in mother-tongue. In practice, most LCCs tend to focus on preservation of identity, culture, and ethnic rights, with a fear of those rights being suppressed by more dominant Chin groups.

Some Chin nationalists believe that teaching multiple languages is divisive of the imagined Chin nations. Such stakeholders generally suggest that some 5-8 of the “bigger” Chin languages should be prioritized in separate Townships. Although this would not be in accord with international best practice, the Chin State Parliament (Hluttaw) attempted to adopt this position, with a declaration in November 2019 that five main Chin languages should be adopted for promotion throughout the State in each Township. This declaration seems to have been taken in response to the sometimes confusing and contentious claims and counter-claims put forward by different LCCs and language advocates. It seems that this declaration has yet to be implemented (for the academic year 2020/2021).

There is a more politicized and increasingly vocal group of advocates who seek to promote a unified “single Chin language”, constructed from many elements of the different languages, arguing that this provides for a more strengthened Chin identity, and will enhance community unity in the long run. As a politicized argument this has a strong rationale, but in the context of education improvement this would not help address the key issue of raising educational standards which requires that children learn in the language they know best: their own mother-tongue.

¹⁹ The purpose here is not to conduct a survey of Chin languages, but rather to better understand which languages are spoken in schools, what other teaching needs, capacities exist within local communities to meet the language needs

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research, analysis and consultations outlined above (including the Chin Education Forum), this paper makes two main recommendations for the unique situation in Chin State. These recommendations have been endorsed (and identified as priorities) by the State Education Office, and Minister for Social Affairs:

- To survey the languages spoken in schools or multilingual areas - starting with a pilot in one or more townships (e.g. Kanpetlet, Tonzang Township, or Falam Township); initial focus on high schools in urban areas (where language diversity is generally greatest). This would constitute a needs analysis of the languages spoken (and by how many students), at the same time indicating local capacities and interest in teaching those languages (especially but not only among LCC volunteers).¹⁹
- To develop and implement a training program for local language teachers. Some have not completed formal (even primary) education, and many have had no teacher training. This is one of the key opportunities to collaboration between the LCCs and the MoE: the MoE is committed to providing a quality education to children, but to do this the teachers must be trained. The LCCs are committed to teaching their mother tongues, but lack resources or training. The proposed training program (pre-service and in-service, including possibly mobile training teams) should include development of a “career route” for local language teachers, from part-time work towards eventually full-time appointment with MoE.

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Table of Contents

Background of MEPP

Language Education Issues in Myanmar

An Overview of Chin State

Local Curriculum Content

The Importance of Teaching in Mother-Tongue Languages through Local Curriculum Content

Recommendations

→ References



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