A DEFINATIVE FEATURE OF MON NATIONAL SCHOOLS (MNSs) IS THAT THE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION IS MON LANGUAGE

Mon National Education Committee: Background and Beneficiaries

The Mon National Education Department (MNEC) provides educational services to vulnerable children in Mon State as well as some parts of Karen State and Tenasserim Division. MNEC was founded by the New Mon State Party (NMSP) in 1972 with the aim “to provide high quality education to Mon youth in their mother tongue”. The Mon National School (MNS) education system allows students to receive a mother tongue based education while incorporating Myanmar as a principle language. This allows for an education system that is valued by the community, works towards community and family cohesion and allows for the recognition of student learning and achievement, enabling them to transfer to formal education or to continue to higher education.

In the 2015-2016 academic year MNEC provided mother tongue based - multilingual education (MTB-MLE) services to over 26,000 students. These students include 11,781 students supported by 752 teachers in the 136 community schools administered directly by MNEC as well as the 14,698 students in 95 government schools where MNEC supports 154 Mon language teachers to deliver Mon language and literacy classes and Mon History during the school day.

The students that MNEC serves are from remote and underserved areas where the community school is often the only source of available education. In 2015-2016, MNEC observed a 73% student retention rate from grade-to-grade (Grades 1-11) in MNSs and an 85% teacher retention rate.

In basic education MNEC schools teach a MTB curriculum in primary education while following the Myanmar Government curriculum in science, and Burmese. In middle school the government curriculum is taught primarily, while subjects on Mon history and language are also provided. For secondary students MNEC schools use the same curriculum as the government in order to prepare students for the matriculation exam, taken after high school, which determines the ability of students to access further education, as well as employment opportunities.

All of the 136 MNEC community schools have formed a PTA, currently in various stages of development and sophistication. Across the MNEC school system the PTAs provide on average 35% of the school running costs, including the stipends of the teachers.

MNEC’s educational approach intentionally places community perspectives and values at the center. MNEC strives to provide nationally recognized education opportunities for children through Community Driven Convergence.

World Education has worked in partnership with MNEC since 2008 under the USAID funded SHIELD and Project for Local Empowerment (PLE).
Language and Policy

Mon Language is spoken by approximately 743,000 people in Myanmar, however it is decreasing in use (Ethnologue, 2004). Of the 28 endangered languages in Myanmar, Mon Language has been designated as “vulnerable”. From 1962 - 1988 Mon Language was taught as a subject in government schools in Mon communities. Only since recent state-level agreements have MNEC-supported language teachers been able to teach Mon Language at MOE schools after regular school hours.

Within the 2015 Amendments of the National Education Bill Chapter 7, Section 43: (b) states that “If there is a need, an ethnic language could be used alongside Myanmar as a language of instruction at the basic education level”. While this flexibility in language policy represents a step towards greater inclusion of indigenous languages in MoE classrooms, how this policy is implemented in practice varies greatly throughout the nation.

The 2016 Naypyidaw Principles for the Development of a Peacebuilding National Language Policy for Myanmar highlights 2 critical areas for parallel ethnic education systems, such as MNEC.

1. Diversity: by supporting ethnic and indigenous communities to maintain, enjoy, and transmit their language to their children and
2. Ethnic Rights: by recognizing the unique cultures and traditions of Myanmar’s indigenous people.

Language Policy Implemented at Mon National Schools: Gradual MTB-MLE Approach

MNEC has developed and implements a gradual MTB-MLE language policy that incorporates Mon, Myanmar Language and English in line with international recommendations on language learning. Early education in only in the children’s mother tongue: Mon Language. As students progress through school, Myanmar Language is added to the curriculum and by high school the students also learn English language. Mon Language is used as the language of instruction the entire time.

Study Methodology

In order to determine the perspectives of different educational stakeholders across Mon State, MNEC’s Program Coordinator led a team to conduct a mixed methods survey. Surveys were translated into both Mon and Myanmar language to mitigate any language barriers of the participants. Survey questionnaires were administered to 2 groups: parents and teachers. Surveyed parents were self-selected, with the exception of ensuring gender balance, during MNEC community education awareness workshops. Parents represented a diverse range of age, education background and income levels. Focal Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted in 7 locations by MNEC senior staff members. Field research was conducted from May - September, 2016. The main objective of the research project was to gain insight into community preferences regarding the opportunities for children in MNSs to sit the Myanmar state system grade 8 exam. The purpose of the research was to identify key community-informed messages for future education interventions, policy engagement and planning. In total, 54 (27m/27f) parents and 76 teachers answered the survey questionnaires and 8 FGDs were held.

Parents were given a 16-question mixed method survey to complete in addition to collecting background information on their families and education history. The surveyed parents had a total of 151 children, 102 of which were currently enrolled in an MNS school, 16 in a MoE primary school, and 5 enrolled in monastic education. The remaining children were no longer in school because they had either completed or had dropped out. To address potential limitations around parent literacy, survey questions were read to parents, who could thus respond verbally and have their responses documented accordingly. Questions centered around 6 main thematic areas: language of instruction, language learning, proximity of schools to communities, quality of education, accreditation, and education costs. Below are some examples of survey questions utilized:

If you have children that attend MNEC schools, what is the main reason you chose these schools?
If you have children that attend government schools, what is the main reason you chose these schools?
Do you want your children to take the matriculation (grade 10) exam?
Do you think that learning Mon language in school is important?
Do you want your child learning Mon language in school hours?

Whilst the focus of the research sought to obtain insight into the views of parents, given the potential implications for MNS teachers, they were asked one question only:

Do you think grade 8 students should take the grade 8 exam?

Each FGD had approximately 6 participants including parents, school committee members and community leaders. FGDs were voice recorded to ensure all responses were documented. Each FGD comprised of the following 4 qualitative questions:

1. Do you want your children to be able to take the government grade 8 exam? Why?
2. What MNEC and community should do to have the school sustains in the future?
3. What do you think of teaching mother tongue based in MNEC schools?
4. What do you think teaching Mon Language as a subject in the government schools?

Participants had the opportunity to respond and engage with the questions in a group setting with all responses being recorded by an assistant interviewer. All qualitative results from the FGDs were consolidated and organized thematically based on the perspectives of the responses. It should be noted that the field research locations make up a representative sample of areas administered by MNEC, however further research in additional areas under direct government and mixed administration would provide further insight into community perspectives surrounding testing, education management and language.
Key Findings

- Learning and receiving instruction in the mother tongue is the main reason why parents choose MNS schools.
- Most parents believe Mon should be the language of instruction for the duration of their children’s education
- Parents desire for their children to matriculate
- 57% of respondents stated that they want their children to take the national grade 8 exam

Discussion and Recommendations

Teacher Survey

When 76 MNS teachers were asked should students be provided with the opportunity to take the grade 8 exam by respective education providers, 40 responded “Yes”. This mixed result could be attributed to many factors including:

- The added pressure that would be placed on MNS teachers to prepare students to take the exam
- The added pressure on students to sit the exam considering language barriers
- The teachers’ perception of the added value of the exam
- The uncertainty of administrative support that would be provided by the MoE for exam preparation and implementation
- The fear of discrimination for MNS students if the exam was not administered by MNEC

Parent Survey

It should be noted that parents represent a wide range of educational backgrounds and proficiencies ranging from attaining an undergraduate degree to never having attended formal school. Table 1.0 displays the highest level of education, in either MNS or MOE schools, completed among the 54 surveyed parents.

100% of participants responded that learning Mon language was important to them. A follow-up question had participants select until which level of education they thought Mon Language should be learned in school. 80% of respondents felt that their children should learn Mon Language until university level. The remaining participants responded “high school” (9%) and “middle school” (11%) respectively. These results reinforce the importance language plays in school choice. When asked “Until what education level should children be taught Mon Language?” 74% of respondents selected until grade 10 - the completion of high school. Not only are parents wanting children to become literate in their mother tongue language through language-learning, the majority also desire for Mon language to be the language of instruction for learning other subjects. When asked “If you have children that attend MNEC schools, what is the main reason you chose these schools?”, overwhelmingly “I want my children to learn Mon language” was selected by 67% (n=36) of respondents. Other responses included language barrier (9%), which refers to the fact that parents believed their children did not have the Myanmar language proficiency to able to thrive in a MOE school. Good quality education (9%) and school proximity (6%) were also contributing motivations by parents as MNSs have existed for decades in locations unreached by governmental support. Respondents were also asked that, if available, did they want their children to transfer to a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastic School</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not Attend School</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.0 Highest Level of Education Completed by Parents

“Mon language should be taught within school hours at government schools. Having after-hours language classes is discrimination and not acceptable”
- Parent in Maraw Chai
government school. The majority of participants responded “no”, however there was some desire to transfer as seen in the graph below:

For the 14 participants whose children attend a MoE school, when asked about the reason they chose to attend a government school, wanting to learn Myanmar Language was the most frequent result (50%, n=7) followed by access to recognized education (21%, n=3). Overwhelmingly, both parents of children in MNS and MoE schools responded that they wanted their children to take the grade 10 matriculation exam. 93% of participants responded that they wanted their children to sit the grade 10 national exam. This option has existed for children who attend MNS schools since agreements were made in 1996.

When asked “Now, the government is trying to begin standard 8 testing in MNEC Schools. Do you want your child to take the standard 8 exam?” the result varied compared to the previous question on grade 10 testing. 57% of respondents wanted their children to be able to take the grade 8 exam. In a follow-up question, respondents that stated “yes” indicated that they believed that having their children sit the grade 8 exam would better prepare them for the grade 10 test and allow for easier school transfer in the future.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the focus group discussions, recommendations from community members to the following education stakeholders surfaced:

**MNEC**
- Continued advocacy to MoE for recognition of existing MNEC curricula and board exams
- Increased student preparation for national exams
- Strengthened community collaboration and cost-sharing mechanisms utilizing Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) for MNS sustainability
- Continued opportunities for teacher capacity building and professional development
- Financial management training for school leaders and promotion of localized school funds or micro-loan programs
- Continued transparency with educational strategies and planning

**Myanmar MoE**
- Mother Tongue languages should be taught as a subject during school hours at government schools
- Mother Tongue languages should be used as the medium of instruction for teaching math, science, and social studies subjects
- Students should become fluent in MT before introducing the national language into classrooms
- MT language teachers should receive the same salary as government school teachers

**International Donors**
- Continue to support teacher capacity-building and training to prevent attrition and increase the quality of education
- Support the building of additional schools to improve access to education
- Support MNEC to advocate on behalf of communities for student and teacher recognition, inclusive language policy and curricula recognition
- Financially support teacher stipends for teachers working in Mon National Schools

“As Mon people, we must become literate in our mother tongue language out of respect for our history and culture. Our children must first learn Mon Language before learning the national language”

- Parent in Krain Bine
Conclusions

Based on the findings on the perspectives of parents, teachers and school committee members, and given the achievements of MNEC to coordinate and dialogue with regional government, convergence efforts for co-facilitation of the national grade 8 exam are strongly recommended. This point in the academic year also represents a strategic time to work towards convergence as students and teachers would have the time necessary to adequately prepare for the national exams which will be administered in March 2017. Both parents and teachers expressed some resistance due to language barriers and administrative uncertainty. To continue to support MNEC’s community driven convergence strategy, co-facilitation of exams by MNEC and state government would represent an ideal approach as community fears would be minimized with a locally recognized and trusted source, MNEC, sharing administrative authority. This would also act to increase MNEC’s profile and legitimacy with regional government and could potentially support another advocacy goal of MNEC: the recognition of transfer certificates for students wanting to transfer from a Mon National School to a MoE school.