

# **Conceptualising early childhood care and development in fragile states: Understanding children and childhood in Myanmar**

**Lynn Ang and Lily Wong**

## **Abstract**

Accelerating political and economic reforms in Myanmar are shaping the country considerably. In a fast-changing national landscape, Myanmar is a developing country in East Asia with a rapidly evolving early childhood sector. Although empirical research on early childhood in Myanmar is generally limited, it is likely that current reforms in the country and internationally will significantly influence the way children and childhood are defined and understood. This article will offer a critical discussion of constructions of childhood and the critical issues and debates pertaining to children's care and education. The article argues that competing national agendas, particularly in the context of fragile, developing nations with complex political and socio-economic conditions, present new challenges in shaping children's care and education. It contends that an inherent paradox remains in that while early childhood is increasingly recognised by governments as a 'public good', the early childhood sector, its governance and infrastructures face considerable challenges in a largely resource-limited environment, thus highlighting the stark disparity between aspirational policies and social reality. The article also presents an insight into an on-going longitudinal preschool teacher training project that began in 2003, developed collaboratively between the Myanmar government and a group of volunteer early childhood care and development specialists and organisations, as an illustration of how early care and education is being conceptualised in the country. In a wider global context, the discussion will also explore the ways in which international advocacy for children's rights, as reflected, for instance, through the Millennium Development Goals, is shifting the way children and childhood are perceived nationally and globally.

## **Keywords**

Care and development, children, early childhood, Myanmar

## **Introduction**

This article focuses on some of the critical issues and debates relating to how children's care and education is conceived and constructed in Myanmar. Studies around early childhood care and development (ECCD)<sup>1</sup> have expanded considerably in recent decades, enriching our understanding of the multifaceted nature of children's early experiences. The complex epistemology of children and childhood has given rise to a variety of concepts and definitions used across different disciplines and countries and by various organisations. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2011a) refers to early education as 'early childhood care and education' (ECCE). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) uses the term 'early childhood education and care' (ECEC), while the United Nations (UN) (2003) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) tend to use the terms 'Early Childhood Development' (ECD) (UNICEF, 2009) and 'Early Childhood', respectively. In the context of Myanmar and for the purpose of this article, the term 'early childhood care and development' is used to describe the holistic continuum of care, education and development of children in their surrounding familial, social and societal contexts.

In examining the role of ECCD in Myanmar, this article recognises the complex factors that contribute to children's early experiences, including the governance and delivery of early childhood education, the curriculum and ways in which children's early experiences are shaped. The article comprises four sections. The first section will contextualise ECCD from an international perspective, taking into account mounting international concern for the quality of early childhood services and children's well-being, as evident from the *Education For All Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO,

2014) and post-2015 *Millennium Development Goal* (MDG) agendas. The second section will provide some insights into the early childhood landscape in Myanmar, exploring the critical issues that continue to evolve in the process of emerging domestic reforms. The discussion will set out a conceptual framework for understanding children and childhood from a constructivist point of view, by arguing that there is no normative or universal set of characteristics that can be used to define 'the child' or childhood. Rather, children and childhood are shaped by the diverse social, cultural and political contexts in which they live and the importance of acknowledging the holistic ecological construction of children in a country with a complex political, cultural and social history. The third and fourth sections will draw on existing scholarship to further develop the discussion around childhood and children's experiences in Myanmar. It will explore the implications of a teacher training project in the government's attempts to enhance the access and quality of ECCD provisions and the role of teacher education and the curriculum. The article argues that the social, cultural and political context of a developing society such as Myanmar makes a significant difference to its representations of children and childhood.

### **Early childhood: The international context**

The latest UNESCO (2014) Global Monitoring Report *Teaching and learning: Achieving quality for all. Education for All* (EFA) sets out six education goals that are to be achieved by the global community by 2015. World leaders and international organisations that have committed to working towards these global targets span both the developed and developing worlds including Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Central and East Asia, comprising emerging countries such as Mongolia, Nepal, Timor-Leste and Myanmar. Firmly embedded as Goal 1, 'Early childhood care and education' remains a high priority on the EFA agenda, with Goal 2 as 'Universal primary education' (p. 2). As stated in the report, '[t]he links between early childhood care and education are strong and mutually reinforcing. Early childhood care and education services help build skills at a time when children's brains are developing, with long-term benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds' (p. 2). The report is informed by extant research which shows the importance of the quality of early care and education provision, and its significance for children's long-term wellbeing and outcomes, particularly when supported by strong government policy in achieving social objectives (Chan, 2013; Paull, 2014; Walker, 2011). It is widely recognised internationally that children's early experience can help build cognitive and non-cognitive development during early childhood as a foundational phase of human development, with long-term benefits, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is also evidence to suggest that with a strong foundation in early childhood, children are more likely to achieve in schooling with better educational attainment in the longer term (UNESCO, 2010).

Within the international community, there is also emerging consensus that improving children's lives must go well beyond an education focus towards a more holistic, multi-sectoral and multidimensional understanding of children's development and needs. Comprehensive care and education provision including social welfare, education and health care, are essential components in any society. The EFA and MDGs, which are focused on poverty reduction and human development in fragile developing countries, advocate for the importance of achieving a basic level of education, health and social equality in order that children are enabled to reach their full potential. The post-2015 MDG framework continues the drive towards promoting education outcomes for all children, and this importantly includes the global drive towards eradicating extreme poverty (goal 1), achieving universal primary education (goal 2) and effective global partnerships (goal 8). The United Nations Conventions on the Right of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) remains a seminal international policy underpinning the post-2015 MDG agenda and advocating for access to ECCE as a fundamental human right for all children (UN, 2007).

Yet, even as the role of education and early childhood is recognised as pivotal and transformative in improving children's lives, there remain stark inequalities. The gaps globally and regionally, between children who live in poor and rich countries, and within countries between those who live well and those who live in abject conditions remain (UN, 2013a, 2013b; OECD, 2013; UNESCO, 2011a). International figures show a wide gap in pre-primary and primary education enrolment and attainment across and within countries. A report by the OECD identifies 47 fragile states that are classified as 'home to an increasingly concentrated proportion of the world's poor' (p. 11), which are more susceptible to political and socio-economic instability. Almost a third of the fragile states are in the East Asia and Asia-Pacific region, in countries such as Timor-Leste, Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar with a significant proportion of children and families living at risk in vulnerable situations as a result of poverty, conflict, natural disaster and other adversity.

More than 10 years on from the MDG declaration in 2000 at the UN Millennium Summit, reviews undertaken by international agencies indicate that progress towards the global targets is in danger of waning. The *Education for All Global Monitoring Reports* (UNESCO, 2011a, 2013a) and the UN (2013b) MDG Report reveal daunting challenges persist, and progress on ECCD in the East Asia and Asia-Pacific region is mixed. In addition, with the issue of quality an on-going challenge, the latest EFA report (UNESCO, 2014) warns that the quality of education and children's early learning experience is a compounding factor: 'poor quality is holding back learning even for those who make it to school. One third of primary school age children are not learning the basics, whether they have been to school or not' (UNESCO, 2013: 5). Indeed, issues of quality and access of ECCD as well as primary education are challenges which all governments face. Critical debates persist at a policy and political level about what can be done to ensure that the well-being of young children is protected and quality ECCD is delivered, especially for those who are vulnerable and most at risk (Hassan, 2007). These prevailing issues and debates are compounded by competing national agendas, particularly in the context of developing nations such as Myanmar, where political and socio-economic changes present new challenges as well as possibilities in the sustainable development of children's care and education.

### **The early childhood landscape in Myanmar**

Against the evolving international backdrop discussed above, Myanmar could be described as a country with distinct complexities and possibilities. As one of the largest, if not largest, country in South-East Asia with an estimated population of over 50 million (Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2014), Myanmar possesses significant potential, both in terms of human capital and resource development, particularly in terms of ECCE, teacher training and the wider education field. Various research and policy reports have highlighted the Myanmar government's intention for education to play a significant role in promoting the values and knowledge that support the development of a sustainable and inclusive education sector (Cheesman, 2003; UNESCO, 2013). Cheesman (2003) suggests that schooling and education in Burma (Myanmar) have historically played an integral role 'as a device for social and political legitimacy' (p. 45). This is particularly poignant given the strong drive towards the improvement of education standards regionally, for instance, among countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (UNESCO, 2011b), and Myanmar government's desire to garner a level of legitimacy and prestige internationally. It could also be argued that the burgeoning role of education, and the rising profile of early children's care and education in Myanmar's public policy, is in part due to rapidly emerging political reforms, with an increasing focus on public services and provisions.

To fully understand the early childhood landscape in Myanmar is to consider it in the context of the country's political history, with its transition from a predominantly socialist to a civilianised government. For more than two decades, the country was led by an entrenched military junta,

described by various writers as a 'military-backed quasi-socialist regime' (Holliday, 2010: 116), in an era characterised by the 'Burmese way to socialism' (Mieno, 2013: 94; Turnell, 2011). The country's history of military rule and governance effectively distanced Myanmar from the world economy, with little engagement with the international community. However, in recent years, the initiation of a new parliamentary-based constitution and a general election in 2010 saw a new era in the country's development. While a level of uncertainty remains in the country's surge towards political change, it is evident that a process of democratisation and socio-economic reforms had begun (Mieno, 2013; Pedersen, 2013). Today, accelerating political and economic change continues to shape the country, with a growing private sector and new emerging socio-economic developments.

As Mieno (2013) observes, that Myanmar was nominated as chair for the ASEAN's general meeting held in 2014 is a clear indication of the country's return to the global community. Researchers have also noted that the new Myanmar government is much more open to a collaborative approach to reaching global targets of alleviating poverty, engendering human rights and prioritising social agendas such as education and ECCD (Pedersen, 2013; Ware, 2011). As Ware (2011) highlights, there is a discernible desire by the Myanmar government to bring about growth and development in the country. It is against this backdrop of social and political transformation that children in Myanmar are growing up. In a fast-changing political context, the national early childhood landscape is best described as complex, dynamic and rapidly evolving. As a largely Euro-American Western construct, the rising profile of ECCD on the national agenda is in part precipitated by the influence of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). The Jomtien world conference on 'EFA' held on 1990, for instance, sponsored by INGOs including the World Bank and UN organisations, and the latter World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000 (UNESCO, 2000) were key drivers in bringing about collective advocacy for ECCD nationally and across the region. Spurred on by the Dakar framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) and MDGs, the Myanmar EFA National Action Plan (2003–2015) and 30-year long-term Education Development Plan in Myanmar were set out by the government (Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Ministry of Education, 2014). The value of ECCD, and with it the role of education in shaping a society, became emerging national priorities in Myanmar, with the aim of improving the access and quality of ECCD provision to enhance the opportunities for children and young people (Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Ministry of Education, 2008, 2014). The recent legislation of the ECCD Bill, instituted in February 2014, cements the central role of ECCD in the country (Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Ministry of Education, 2014).

The Myanmar *National EFA Review Report* (Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Ministry of Education, 2014) explicitly identifies early childhood as a target area for capacity building. Early childhood or pre-primary in Myanmar is generally defined as birth up to the age of 8 years. The compulsory school age is 5 years and ECCD programmes cater for children 3–4 years (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014). ECCD is maintained under the jurisdiction of the Department of Social Welfare (DSW), where all pre-primary or preschool settings are expected to be legally registered with. A diverse range of early childhood provision and programmes are available including centre-based day care, community-based, home-based and parenting education (UNESCO, 2011c). ECCD provisions are serviced by both state and non-state providers – the DSW, Ministry of Education (MOE), as well as private, voluntary and INGOs and individuals. It is also commonplace for early childhood programmes that are serviced by the state through the DSW to serve a dual purpose as centres for the training of preschool teachers and upskilling of the workforce to support the education and development of all children.

Macro-political developments suggest that children's care and education is an increasing focus in Myanmar's national policy. In a widely publicised report in July 2014, the Myanmar

government launched its inaugural multi-sectoral policy on ECCD.<sup>2</sup> This was in part motivated by the government's attempts to address the stark disparities in access to ECCD services. The report highlights the government's recognition of the importance of investment in early childhood as a driver for national development and alleviating poverty, supported by the country's President U Thein Sein in his support for the implementation of ECCD activities. The report on a local online forum Myawady News (2014) states, '[I]aunching the ECCD policy is the first concrete step toward mobilizing more resources across ministries for the support to early childhood development and a crucial measure in tackling child poverty and reducing inequalities' (p. 1). The report also calls for a more integrated, holistic approach to ECCD with collaboration among key ministries – the DSW and MOE – to achieve a collective vision for the country's children, with a projection of 28% of the budget from the DSW and 12% from the MOE in early preschool and kindergarten education services by 2020 (Myawady News, 2014; UNICEF Media, 2014).

### **'Strengthening early childhood development and education': Insights into a teacher training project**

The early childhood landscape in Myanmar, discussed above, has inevitably evolved from the country's complex historical and political legacy. Taking into account this policy context, an insight into a teacher training project entitled 'Strengthening early childhood development and education' described in this section will offer a deeper understanding of the ECCD sector and the sustained efforts undertaken by the Myanmar government in collaboration with the private and voluntary sectors, to raise the quality of preschool education, particularly in relation to teacher training and workforce capacity building. As the Deputy Director of the DSW asserted, 'training is key to quality' (Daw Khin, 2009: 8).

The project 'Strengthening early childhood development and education' began in 2003 in Yangon and Mandalay, with the participation of 65 multi-sectoral early childhood professionals including preschool teacher trainers, principals, family and community leaders, essentially all those who are involved in the delivery of preschool training and services. Participants of the programme were recruited mainly by the DSW, Department of Education and non-government organisations (NGOs) in the voluntary and private sectors such as Save the Children, World Vision, the Yinthwe Foundation, Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association, the Young Women's Christian Association and other faith-based organisations (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014).

Funded by the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), the project team constituted a group of 11 ECCE specialists from diverse sectors, including preschool principals, academics, educational consultants, researchers and authors of children's literature, with a range of expertise in language development, science, maths, teacher training and the arts. The training consisted of a series of workshops delivered through intensive blocks of 3 weeks twice a year, with workshops in the north undertaken in Mandalay and in the South Yangon. The training targeted local preschool teachers, trainers and principals and focused on various areas of early years practice and pedagogy such as 'child observation and assessment', 'working with parents', 'adult learning and training strategies', 'creating a learning environment' and significantly, developing a curricular model for children aged 3–5 years. An overarching aim of the training is to foster knowledge exchange between trainers and practitioners and to advance the knowledge and skills of preschool professionals.

The initiation of the project was reflective of an expanding ECCD sector, particularly with the proliferation of community-based provision and the burgeoning professional development needs of early childhood caregivers or professionals. The Deputy Director commented,

Implementing Early Childhood Care and Development Programme in many Center-based ECCD systems is in place in Myanmar. At present, the coverage of the programme for [the] holistic development of Myanmar young children became increased by expanding of community-based system. Young children, from conception to six years old, undergo rapid development and therefore require the role of care givers and preschool teachers, which is a vital sector. Therefore, it is necessary to provide various types of quality ECCD training for caregivers, preschool teachers, parents as well as community members. (Daw Khin, 2009: 2)

The introduction of this multi-disciplinary project was reflective of the government's emphasis on workforce training and the role of early childhood professionals in maintaining quality provision and practice. What is also apparent is the government's steer in driving multi-sectoral collaborations among key stakeholders to enhance the sector. Referring to the established history of ECCD development in the country, the Director of the DSW noted, [The] Department of Social Welfare has been carrying out Early Childhood Care and Development activities since 1948. ... There are 67 preschools run by the Department of Social Welfare. As a social sector in a broad area, the department has urged people to collaborate in voluntary social services by supporting funds for voluntary preschools and giving preschool teacher training. ... A team for developing pre-school curriculum has been formed [by] experts with the social sector, health sector, psychologists, writers, poets and artists. (U Sein Win, 2009: 2)

Working within a multi-disciplinary team, a key output of the project was the development of a teacher training manual for ECCD, subsequently translated into the Myanmar language in 2014 and published by the government. Significantly, this was also informed by discussions at an international level at The Global Education Forum convened in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000 with the six EFA goals, one of which was 'expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education'. The training guide focused on the support of early childhood professionals in key areas of programme delivery including 'the importance of the early years', 'poverty cycle', 'holistic approach of child development', 'ECCD programmes in difficult circumstances', 'importance of community involvement' and 'appropriate types of ECCD programmes relating to the community's needs' (Daw Khin, 2009: 6). A strong emphasis throughout the training was the delivery of ECCD programmes and practices that were both appropriate and relevant to the Myanmar context. As reported in a follow-up seminar by the project leader, there was clear consensus among the training team that while the project entailed the sharing of collective knowledge and skills in ECCD, these exchanges needed to be applicable in a way that was 'acceptable to the local culture and "do-able" in Myanmar' (p. 1), and given the limited resources, 'the use of low-cost, indigenous and recycled resources would play a big part in the training as well' (Khuo, 2009: 1). Significantly, the SIF's current commitment to the workforce training in Myanmar has led to a new phase in the training of preschool teachers and trainers on methods of teaching English language in preschool settings, with training workshops currently being held in Yangon and thereafter Mandalay in the coming year.

### **Constructions of ECCE through the preschool curriculum**

Notably, the project 'Strengthening early childhood development and education' has led to the launch of a preschool curriculum in 2007. The initiative was informed by the work of a curriculum development sub-group and subsequently endorsed by the National Education Committee (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014). The genesis of the preschool curriculum could be traced to the establishment of a preschool and day care syllabus drafting working group in 1974–1975 and the introduction of a preschool and day care curriculum or syllabus in 1977. The introductory commentary in the preschool curriculum (Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare, 2007) notes a preoccupation with children's care and education in the country's history even during the militant 'socialist' era. The document states (in

translation),

Day care activities for children have been taking place in Myanmar since [the] pre-independence period. [The] [h]ealth and development of children has come to play an important role when social welfare activities are conducted with the proclamation of [the] people education council law on 4-11-1948. (Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare, 2007: 2)

A distinct aspect of the curriculum lies in the conception of ECCD as the 'holistic development of Myanmar young children' (Daw Khin, 2009: 2). The aim of the project to support the 'physical, mental, social, emotional and language development' of children from early childhood suggests a broad-based understanding of how ECCE should be conceptualised. Indeed, over the last three decades, the focus on a holistic care and education provision has had a major influence on policy and curricular developments in the early childhood field in the country. The online source of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare (2007) cites three key documents relating to preschool education – the preschool curriculum and syllabus, guideline of caring for children under 3 years old and teachers' guide on the preschool curriculum (Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare, 2007). The introduction of the preschool curriculum in Myanmar offers useful insights into constructions of ECCD, in practice as well as conceptually. Within an academic discourse, it is widely recognised that the notion of childhood is a social and cultural construction, where understandings of childhood vary and children live through a range of everyday experiences influenced by culture, gender, class, politics and other societal factors (Corsaro, 2005; LeVine and New, 2008; Rogoff, 2003). In short, constructions of ECCE are inextricably linked to a society's approach to education and understandings of how children develop and learn, and these are in turn represented through prevailing education systems, curricular and pedagogical practices (Ang, 2010; Tobin, 2007). Preschool programmes across a variety of settings including centre-based, community-based and family-based provision underpin society's understandings and assumptions of how children develop and are cared for. In the field of early childhood, contemporary theoretical paradigms particularly around the sociology of childhood attest to the importance of situating children's development within their social and cultural contexts, and the influence of this on childcare practices and the preschool curriculum (Anning et al., 2009; James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002).

Within this conceptual framework, children are viewed as active co-constructors of their experiences, through observing and participating actively in the society and environment in which they live (Corsaro, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Rogoff, 2003; Tobin, 2007). Researchers have also stressed the role of culture and beliefs that are vital in shaping the norms of teaching and learning across educational settings (Rogoff, 2003; Tobin, 2007). A prevailing view is that early childhood settings are essentially cultural institutions (Ang, 2011; Tobin, 2007), where socio-cultural values play an important role in the way the curriculum and constructions of children's education are shaped: 'the creation of curriculum is a human endeavour, and like all human endeavours involves the cultural values, beliefs, assumptions, theories and languages of its developers in its very construction' (Edwards, 2003: 251).

From a sociological paradigm, constructions of children, childhood and learning are therefore embedded within a particular social, cultural and historical context and are a product of time and place. Decisions about how children's care and education is delivered are also informed by the particular society's understanding and assumptions of how children develop and learn and determined by its purpose and function (what and for who ECCD is for). Arguably, as a cultural and social construct, children's care and education epitomises larger societal concerns

and expectations. They help shape government and public expectations of education and educational practice.

In the context of Myanmar, a central approach to ECCD is seen to be constructed within a sociocultural and historical paradigm, as encapsulated in the preschool curriculum and national-level policy. A prevailing focus of the curriculum is that of a holistic, multi-sectoral and culturally based provision based on the 'all round development of children' (Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare, 2012). In a policy statement by the DSW, the government's vision for ECCD was set out in a 'National Plan of Action for Children' (Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare, 2012) which entails a national strategy (2006–2015) for the future involving (a) promotion of ECCE, (b) improving all-round development of children aged 0–8 years and (c) modernising the information management system (Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare, 2012). The policy and national strategy set a direction for ECCD in the country and are to be considered alongside the preschool curriculum introduced in 2007, which makes explicit the purpose of the curriculum, which are as follows:

- (a) to obtain proper development of good characteristics of pre-school children such as physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual, emotional, socialization and aesthetic enjoyment corresponding to their age
- (b) to obtain physical well-being and blissful state of mind
- (c) to cultivate love for one's country and national races through fondness of one's immediate neighbours
- (d) to nurture children between 3 to 5 years of age prior to their admission to primary School. (Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare, 2007).

The Myanmar policy on ECCD makes explicit that a 'culturally and linguistically appropriate preschool education' (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014: 109) is pivotal to the building of early childhood services for the benefit of society. The policy stipulates, '[a]ll preschool services will respect local cultures and will be provided in the mother tongue of the children and their parents' (p. 109). A strong emphasis is placed on the role of culture in the development of society, with an almost reverence stance towards the preservation of the local culture. As the policy goes on to stress, '[b]y providing early education in the mother tongue, educational rights will be respected, learning achievement will improve, and requests for mother tongue education will be honoured' (p. 116). Thus, at a time when the government is stepping up its engagement with the global community, there is an apparent emphasis on rebuilding the Myanmar society and cultural identity, as well as enhancing its capacity for the delivery of key public services such as ECCD and education. A strong rhetoric of the role of ECCD for nation building ('to cultivate love for one's country') and social cohesion ('to cultivate ... love for national races through fondness of one's immediate neighbours) underpins the national policy and curriculum. The importance for children to acquire the local socio-cultural values and knowledge of the Myanmar language, tradition and culture is firmly embedded within the curriculum (Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare, 2007). The construction of children and early childhood as contributing to a 'national building spirit' (Preschool curriculum, p. 3), to inform a national consciousness and the development of a nation-state is pervasive, even if perhaps unsurprising given Myanmar's political history and the government's desire to rebuild the country. The stated purpose of the preschool curriculum demands high expectations for early childhood, not only as a conduit for (re) building the foundations of a national education but also for the development of the country's cultural and national identity. It would appear that ECCD in Myanmar has taken on an educational, moral, as well as national purpose.



However, even as ECCD in Myanmar is experiencing unprecedented prominence in public policy and national reforms, there remain prevailing issues to be addressed. The UNESCO country programme 2013–2015 report on Myanmar (UNESCO, 2013) contends that there remain critical challenges affecting the childhood experience and learning opportunities for many children: there is still a disparity in access to, and the duration of, quality education opportunities for children and different population groups. A range of factors, including gaps in teacher education and management, limited resources, difficulties in school management and incomplete policy/strategy regarding ECD, NFE, language in education and inclusive education, have constrained progress in quality development. (p. 2) With disparities in education and ECCD opportunities, figures for children’s outcomes and health are similarly of concern. The World Health Organization and UNICEF (2012) report on *Building a Future for Women and Children* indicates that much progress is still to be made in alleviating the under-5 mortality rate in Myanmar.

The changing profile of the population is also shaping the development of ECCD in Myanmar. Tin et al. (2013) highlight the increasing demand for childcare centres or preschools in Myanmar due to demographic changes with parents working longer hours and more women in employment. In urbanised areas, traditional caregivers such as grandparents and the extended family are not always available as a support network to care for young children. The inclusion of children from poor, rural communities and minority ethnic groups also poses a particular challenge. Access to ECCD and education remains unequal within states and across local communities as revealed in a recent study by Hardman et al. (2014) on developing pedagogical practices in Myanmar primary schools (Hardman et al., 2014), where the net enrolment for primary schools in Kachin State, for instance, is recorded at 94.8% compared to 61.2% in the Shan State East and 59% in Chin State. A UNESCO report on the country also reveals that development indicators for minority ethnic groups show significant gaps with lower health and education achievements for children and higher levels of poverty (UNESCO, 2013). The report reflects the important need to address issues of inclusion in a multi-ethnic country such as Myanmar to ensure an effective care and education environment for all children regardless of their backgrounds.

At a macro-level, a persistent risk to Myanmar’s growth and development is that of governance, with pertinent implications for the ECEC sector (UNESCO, 2013). It is widely acknowledged that capacity building and development are required for the immediate and future planning, monitoring and evaluation of ECEC services, particularly given the heightened international focus on early childhood and the role of preschool educators as the main agents to improve the social and economic outcomes for children and society. Well-trained teachers, adequate facilities and a relevant curriculum with clearly defined learning outcomes are deemed central to the quality of ECCD services in Myanmar (UNESCO, 2011b, 2011c, 2014).

Like many countries globally, issues of access, quality and equality in ECCD present an ongoing challenge in an evolving early childhood landscape in Myanmar. This is in part due to external international pressures to improve the education attainment and outcomes for children in the country. For a start, domestic information about the status and administration of ECCD appears somewhat patchy. While ECCD is recognised as an important public provision, there is no official register of the exact totality of establishments that provide ECCD services (UNESCO, 2013), with generally limited domestic information about the regulation of ECCD services and contextual information about the operating requirements of the different types of ECCD services and administration.

Figures from the World Bank (2014) and UNESCO (2013) indicate low levels of preprimary enrolment in general, with circa 9% enrolment in 2012 and 10% in 2010. The figures also indicate that significantly fewer children have access to or are accessing early childhood education

than many other countries regionally in the East Asia and the Pacific. The report by UNESCO (2014) lists Myanmar as one of 30 countries as being 'very far from target' to achieving a pre-primary enrolment figure of at least 70% by 2015 (p. 50), while comparative data on education published in the *Global Education Digest 2012* (UNESCO, 2012) reveal an on-going pattern of a high rate of children leaving the education system in the transition from primary to lower secondary education. As with many countries in East Asia and the Asia Pacific where a mixed economy is prevalent in the delivery of early childhood services, the dominance of a private economy of ECCD is evident from the proportion of pre-primary enrolment in private institutions in the country at approximately 61% enrolled in private settings (UNESCO, 2012).

It is worth mentioning at this point that with access to data on Myanmar often limited or unreliable figures by international organisations are hard to corroborate, and attempts to provide a more detailed, systematic account of the early childhood and education sector in the country are difficult (Hardman et al., 2014; Montjourides, 2013; UNESCO, 2014). The use of international indicators for pre-primary and ECCD can also be problematic with shortcomings in the data collection tools and methodologies employed to collect data on new developments in the education sector. The indicators used are largely relative, and it is often hard to obtain accurate figures and trace how existing data have been collated and interpreted. Nonetheless, these indicators provide a point of reference from which to better understand the context in which the early childhood landscape in Myanmar exists and allow for some comparable analysis regionally and internationally. Admittedly, the country data highlight concerns for children's outcomes and well-being in the country, but they also point to the need to explore more closely the specific context of children's experiences in Myanmar – the contextual issues and factors that shape early care and education in the country as a way forwards in the country's continued growth and development. Researchers have suggested that Myanmar's gradual return to democracy continues to be marked by a complex and somewhat precarious transition towards the prioritisation of public services, social justice and human rights agenda, and the search for more equality in society (Cheesman, 2003; Mieno, 2013; Pedersen, 2013; Ware, 2011). However, the country's journey towards achieving these humanitarian and social goals is far from straightforward. The issues facing the early childhood sector highlighted here reflect a growing paradox of ECCD in the country where early childhood is increasingly recognised by the government and policy-makers as an essential 'public good' and 'social necessity', but the sector in general and its existing systems, structures and governance face considerable challenges in a largely resource-limited environment, amid rising demands for quality services. A stark disparity therefore exists between aspirational policies and social reality. It remains to be seen in a highly politicised environment, such as Myanmar, whether continued policy advocacy and research in ECCD will empower and bring about new possibilities for young children and families.

### **Conclusion: Future directions for ECCD in Myanmar**

It would be appropriate, in closing, for us to offer some reflections on the future directions for ECCD in Myanmar. In the *Education For All Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2014), Myanmar is included in a list of conflict-affected countries as home to some of the poorest families, where armed conflict and poverty continue to threaten the educational opportunities and outcomes for a whole generation of children. Understanding children and childhood in a fragile yet dynamic environment such as Myanmar is therefore all the more pertinent as the international community garners renewed political energy to address key development areas such as the promotion of equality, rights and protection for all children, especially for those in the developing world.

Despite inherent constraints and complexities in the early childhood landscape, current policy and curricular developments in Myanmar as discussed in this article point towards an

emerging sector with myriad possibilities, not least in regard to the impact on key stakeholders – children, parents, educators and policy-makers. Amid ensuing reforms, the key issue we contend is to ensure that ECCE remains at the centre, not on the margins, of mainstream educational policies in Myanmar. It is only then that new possibilities for the future direction of early childhood in the country can be envisioned and realised.

### Notes

1. The term ‘early childhood care and development’ (ECCD) will be used throughout this article, in keeping with its common usage in the context of Myanmar and the local early childhood landscape (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014).
2. The launch of the ECCD policy was reported in various online news forum nationally and regionally including Myawady News (2014), <http://www.myawady.com.mm/en/headlines/item/1274-2014-07-09-13-16-15>;

UNICEF Media (2014), [http://www.unicef.org/myanmar/media\\_22783.html](http://www.unicef.org/myanmar/media_22783.html); ShanghaiDaily.com (2014), [http://www.shanghaidaily.com/article/article\\_xinhua.aspx?id=228780](http://www.shanghaidaily.com/article/article_xinhua.aspx?id=228780); MITV news (2014) Early Childhood Care: Policy Launched For Children Health Services, <http://www.myanmarinternational.tv/news/early-childhood-care-policy-launched-children-health-services>

### References

- Ang L (2010) Cross-cultural perspectives in early childhood education: Vygotskian influences and ethnographic insights into one preschool in East Asia, Singapore. In: Tuna A and Hayden J (eds) *Early Childhood Programs as the Doorway to Social Cohesion: Application of Vygotsky's Ideas from an East-West Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 31–44.
- Ang L (2011) *Early Childhood Education in a Diverse Society: An Ethnographic Study of Preschools in Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore Committee of OMEP (World Organisation for Early Childhood Education).
- Anning A, Cullen J and Fleer M (2009) *Early Childhood Education: Society and Culture*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE.
- Chan M (2013) Linking child survival and child development for health, equity and sustainable development. *The Lancet* 381: 1514–1515.
- Cheesman (2003) School, state and Sangha in Burma. *Comparative Education* 39(1): 45–63.
- Corsaro WA (2005) *The Sociology of Childhood*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Daw Khin MN (2009) Training of preschool teachers, parents and community volunteers, Department of Social Welfare. *Paper delivered at the seminar 'Early Childhood Education in Myanmar: Strengthening the foundation in the early years'*, Yangon, Myanmar, 3–4 September.
- Edwards S (2003) New directions: Charting the paths for the role of sociocultural theory in Early Childhood Education and curriculum. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 4(3): 251–266.
- Hardman F, Stoffb C, Aungb W, et al. (2014) Developing pedagogical practices in Myanmar primary schools: Possibilities and constraints. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 1–21. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2014.906387>
- Hassan A (2007) Public policy in early childhood education and care. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* 1(1): 1–10.
- Holliday I (2010) Ethnicity and democratization in Myanmar. *Asian Journal of Political Science* 18(2): 111128.

James J and Prout A (eds) (1997) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. 2nd ed. London: Falmer Press.

Khoo KC (2009) Strengthening early childhood development and education: The SIF-DSW early childhood education training of trainers' Project in Myanmar. *Paper delivered at the seminar 'Early Childhood Education in Myanmar: Strengthening the foundation in the early years'*, Yangon, Myanmar, 3–4 September.

LeVine RA and New RS (ed.) (2008) *Anthropology and Child Development: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. Hoboken, NY: Blackwell Publishing.

Mayall B (2002) *Towards a Sociology for Childhood*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Mieno F (2013) Toward Myanmar's new stage of development: Transition from military rule to the market. *Asian Economic Policy Review* 8: 94–117.

Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare (2007) Preschool School Curriculum and Syllabus. Available at: <http://www.dsw.gov.mm/en/content/developing-policies>

Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Department of Social Welfare (2012) The republic of the union of Myanmar Developing Policies. Available at: <http://www.dsw.gov.mm/en/content/developingpolicies>

Montjourides P (2013) Education data in conflict-affected countries: The fifth failure? *Prospects* 43: 85–105.

*Myawady News* (2014) Myanmar launches early childhood care and development policy. Available at: <http://www.myawady.com.mm/en/headlines/item/1274-2014-07-09-13-16-15>

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD, Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/37425999.pdf>

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2013) *Fragile States. Resource flows and trends in a shifting world*. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/incaf/FragileStates2013.pdf>

Paul G (2014) Can government intervention in childcare be justified? *Economic Affairs* 34(1): 14–34.

Pedersen MB (2013) How to promote human rights in the world's most repressive states: Lessons from Myanmar. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67(2): 190–202.

Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2014) Myanmar policy for early childhood care and development.

Available at: [http://www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Ref\\_Doc\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Care\\_Development\\_Policy\\_2014.pdf](http://www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Ref_Doc_Early_Childhood_Care_Development_Policy_2014.pdf)

Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Ministry of Education (2008) Country report: Myanmar education development strategy. Available at: [http://www.ibe.unesco.org/National\\_Reports/ICE\\_2008/myanmar\\_NR08.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/National_Reports/ICE_2008/myanmar_NR08.pdf)

Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Ministry of Education (2014) Education for All 2015. Post-2015 Development Agenda: Goals Targets and Indicators Special Report. National Review Report. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002297/229723E.pdf>

Ministry of Immigration and Population (2014) The population and housing census of Myanmar. Available at: [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/2010\\_phc/Myanmar/MMR-2014-08-28-provres.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/2010_phc/Myanmar/MMR-2014-08-28-provres.pdf)

Rogoff B (2003) *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tin HW, Nonis KP, Audrey Lim SE, et al. (2013) Teachers' perceptions of the importance of stories in the lives of children in Myanmar. *Early Child Development and Care* 183(10): 1449–1467.

Tobin J (2007) An ethnographic perspective on quality in early childhood education. In: Zhu JX (ed.) *Global Perspectives on Early Childhood Education*. Shanghai, China: East China Normal University Press.

Turnell S (2011) Fundamentals of Myanmar's macroeconomy: A political economy perspective. *Asian Economic Policy Review* 6: 136–153.

U Sein Win (2009) Direction of ECE in Myanmar. The historical development and future plans, Department of Social Welfare. *Paper delivered at the seminar 'Early Childhood Education in Myanmar: Strengthening the foundation in the early years'*, Yangon, Myanmar, 3–4 September.

United Nations (UN) (1989) Convention on the rights of the child. Available at: <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>

United Nations (UN) (2003) Building a world fit for children. Available at: [http://www.unicef.org/sowc06/pdfs/pub\\_build\\_wffc\\_en.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/sowc06/pdfs/pub_build_wffc_en.pdf)

United Nations (UN) (2007) Universal declaration of human rights. Available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/60UDHR/bookleten.pdf>

United Nations (UN) (2013a) The global partnership for development: The challenge we face. *MDG Gap Task Force Report*. Available at: [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2499mdg\\_report\\_2013\\_en.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2499mdg_report_2013_en.pdf)

United Nations (UN) (2013b) *The Millennium Development Goals Report*. New York: UN.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2009) *The State of the World's Children*. Special Edition. Available at: <http://www.unicef.org/sowc/>

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Media (2014) *UNICEF, government and development partners call for the best start in life for children*. Available at: [http://www.unicef.org/myanmar/media\\_22783.html](http://www.unicef.org/myanmar/media_22783.html)

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Available at: <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2000) *The Dakar Framework for Action. Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments*. Paris: UNESCO.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2010) *Reaching the Marginalised*. Paris: Oxford University Press, UNESCO.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2011a) *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*. Paris: UNESCO.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2011b) Regional report on progress towards education for all in Asia and the Pacific. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001916/191665e.pdf>

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2011c) World data on education.

Myanmar, International Bureau of Education. Available at: [http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Myanmar.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Myanmar.pdf)

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2012) Global education digest 2012, UNESCO Institute of Statistics. Available at: <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/globaleducation-digest.aspx>

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2013) *Myanmar. Country Programming Document 2013–2015*. Bangkok: UNESCO. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002237/223703e.pdf>

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2014) *Education for All Global Monitoring Report. Teaching and Learning: Achieving Quality for All*. Paris: UNESCO.

Walker SP, Wachs TD, Grantham-McGregor S, et al. (2011) Inequality in early childhood: Risk and protective factors for early child development *The Lancet* 378: 1325–1338.

Ware A (2011) The MDGs in Myanmar: Relevant or redundant? *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 16(4): 579–596.

World Bank (2014) World development indicators: Participation in education. Available at: <http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/2.11>

World Health Organization and UNICEF (2012) Countdown to 2015, building a future for women and children. The 2012 Report. Available at: <http://www.countdown2015mnch.org/documents/2012Report/2012-complete-no-profiles.pdf>