

NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

Research Paper No. 139

Developing history curricula to support multi-ethnic civil society among Burmese refugees and migrants

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December 2006



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ISSN 1020-7473

Introduction

What children learn about history is widely recognized to influence their perceptions and behavior, yet little attention has been given to how to design history curricula for young people in conflict or post-conflict situations. This paper discusses possibilities for development of history curricula that can support multi-ethnic civil society among Burmese refugees, exiles, migrants, and ethnic nationals.¹

The paper is adapted from the Master's thesis I completed in 2003. The research presented here was conducted in February and March of 2003 in Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, Bangkok, and Mae Hong Son, Thailand. Using an action research methodology and an interview guide approach, I investigated history curricula currently in use in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, in Burmese-run schools in Thailand, and areas controlled by ethnic nationality groups inside Burma, including ceasefire areas. I then evaluated strategies for redesigning these curricula.

In the first section of this paper, I define terms and explain the purpose and context of the project. I include a brief overview of the current educational situation in the areas under discussion. Finally, I discuss why teaching the history of Burma is so controversial by describing the tensions among the versions of history presented by pre-colonial chroniclers, British colonists, Burmese nationalists, ethnic nationalists, and the Burmese authorities.

In the second section, I present and analyze my findings on how different Burmese groups in camps, in ethnic nationality or cease-fire areas, and in Thailand currently teach history in their schools. This section is based on interviews I conducted with curriculum coordinators from six local organizations.

In the third section, I present theoretical and practical recommendations for history curricula in these areas. I discuss what various pedagogical theories (multicultural education, pluralism, experiential education, popular education, and peace education) can offer to Burmese history teachers, and I suggest classroom activities that support multi-ethnic civil society.

I conclude by anticipating problems that might arise in implementing the suggested methodologies, and explaining why the re-design of history curricula remains important despite these obstacles. I also indicate the importance of revising history curricula as a strategy for preventing conflict.

Context and purpose of the study

Before explaining the project in more depth, I would like to clarify its scope. My research includes, but is not limited to refugees living in camps. Other populations—migrants of Burmese origin in Thailand and people living in ethnic nationality or cease-fire areas inside Burma—are also included. This spectrum reflects the unavoidable complexity of life on the border and the difficulty of confining such a

¹ The official name of the country is Myanmar.

study to official designations.² The range of this study also allows for some comparisons among these groups as regards their approaches to education, while attempting to circumvent the artificial limits imposed when studying any of these contexts in isolation of the others. Refugees, exiles, migrants, and ethnic nationals may move among the areas under discussion, and as scholars, I would venture, we must do so as well. This paper also draws from various disciplines (education, history, and conflict resolution): although geared toward an audience primarily concerned with refugees or forced migration, it is also intended for history educators working in any situation of conflict.

Specifically, three of the organizations I investigated (All Burma Students Democratic Front, or ABSDF; Karenni National Progressive Party, or KNPP; and Karen Education Department, or KED, of the Karen National Union, or KNU) run schools inside refugee camps in Thailand, and some also run schools in areas inside Burma that are not controlled by the SPDC. Three organizations (Kachin Independence Organization, or KIO; New Mon State Party, or NMSP; and Shan Culture and Education Committee, or SCEC) run schools in areas of Burma or Thailand that are independent both of the SPDC and the Royal Thai Government (RTG). These schools may be in Thailand, or in cease-fire areas (areas in which organized ethnic groups have made ceasefires with the Burmese military regime), or in ethnic nationality areas (areas inside Burma controlled by armed struggle groups). Geographically, then, my study includes schools on the broadly-defined Thai-Burma border, and areas inside Kachin, Karen, Shan, and Mon States in Burma.³

These groups have met to discuss educational and other issues under the auspices of an umbrella organization called the National Health and Education Committee of Burma (NHEC), a Burmese NGO based in Thailand. However, these groups do not necessarily see themselves as united. There are longstanding tensions among many of the ethnic groups represented in this study. Furthermore, many ethnic groups are subdivided by their allegiances to various political or military groups. Despite these issues, educators from each group have affirmed their intention to work together on curriculum development.

What is a multi-ethnic civil society?

The term “multi-ethnic civil society” comes from the stated goal of a curriculum development project sponsored by the National Health and Education Committee of Burma (NHEC). (Prospect Burma 2003) This term serves as useful shorthand for the educational goals of NHEC and its ethnically and politically based member groups, although these organizations do not necessarily describe their goals with this term. It should also be mentioned that multi-ethnic society is only one of many valid goals of history education; I will voice my assumption here that the purpose of education is continually re-negotiated among policy-makers, educators, and the communities they serve.

² See Lang (2002) for a full description of the origins and subsequent “blurring” of categories of Burmese on the border.

³ Arakanese and Chin groups were not included in this study because of the difficulty of contacting them, and because, to this author’s knowledge, these groups do not run schools that are independent of the Burmese military government.

For my purposes, “civil society” includes Michael Walzer’s sense of the term as “the space of uncoerced human association”; and Stanley Katz’s “social process that generates trust and mutual understanding and mediates state and market pressures.” (Walzer 1995: 7; Katz 1999: 37) In other words, civil society encompasses the voluntary, respectful human relationships that are not dictated by government decree or economic necessity.

“Multi-ethnic,” in this case, means inclusive of Burma’s many ethnic groups. Seven main ethnic groups (Burman, Karen, Shan, Kachin, Arakanese, Chin, Mon, Karenni) and hundreds of sub-groups and smaller groups were included when the British drew the current boundaries of Burma in the late 19th century. A multi-ethnic civil society is one in which members of all of these groups participate in the voluntary relationships described above—or, more to the point, that none are excluded from these relationships on the basis of ethnicity. Although Burmese and non-Burmese often refer to “Karen” camps or “Mon” areas, few (arguably no) contexts are mono-ethnic; a diversity of identities often exists under the smooth surface of these easy labels, and thus multi-ethnicity is a factor in intra-ethnic as well as inter-ethnic contexts.

How does developing history curricula support multi-ethnic civil society?

Designing history curricula to promote multi-ethnic civil society can be placed within what Kimberly Maynard (1999) has described as a five-part process of “rebuilding community cohesion” in a post-conflict environment.⁴ When the people who have been involved in a conflict retell their stories, she argues, they establish an historical record while healing the “wounded group self”: “the community begins to establish a collective memory based on combined input—storytelling in an atmosphere of compassion, encouragement, and support.” (Maynard 1999: 134)

Redesigning history curricula and developing new methodologies for teaching history are part of the latter stages of this process. Maynard (1999: 187) writes that,

Formal school curricula, including textbooks, teachers’ guides, educational devices, and visual aids, may be riddled with biases or influenced by previous regimes’ partiality. Redressing material can not only improve the teaching platform but also demonstrate unwillingness to contribute to segregation or prejudice. Included in the revision of educational texts and teaching curricula can be the insertion of material promoting mutual cooperation.

In addition to the benefits described above, the process of revising curricula can bring together people of all parties, re-establishing relationships through consistent interaction. Revising history curricula is thus an opportunity for collaborative problem solving that builds multi-ethnic civil society through its product and process.

Redesigning history curricula is also a part of a process of conflict transformation. John Paul Lederach (1997) defines conflict not just armed struggle or war, but as a

⁴ As the conflict in Burma is ongoing, it cannot quite be called a ‘post-conflict environment’, yet the extraordinary length (over fifty years) of the civil war there has made it necessary to address long-term social goals even in the midst of continuing hostilities.

social phenomenon that happens in all cultures. As Lederach (1996: 8) summarizes, “conflict is connected to meaning, meaning to knowledge, and knowledge is rooted in culture.” Because of the connections among conflict, knowledge, and culture, revisiting history curricula may create opportunities to “address, integrate, and embrace the painful past and the necessary shared future as a means of dealing with the present.” (Lederach 1997: 35) In other words, educational reform can create a social space in which conflict transformation (as opposed to mere ceasefire) is possible.

Educational opportunities in Burma, in refugee camps, and in Thailand

The effectiveness of educational strategies in promoting social change depends upon children’s access to education, which, unfortunately, cannot be assumed to be widespread or consistent among the population under discussion. In Burma as a whole, the per capita expenditure on education is less than a dollar. (UN Working Group 1998) In ethnic nationality states, the children’s opportunity for formal education is even less than that in the rest of the country; in the Karen, Karenni, and Shan States, only 10% of children attend school. (NHEC 2002: 69) Some families may not take advantage of formal educational opportunities because they value learning to farm, work at a trade, or run a household more highly. (NHEC 2002: 54) Moreover, poverty distracts students and teachers, and violence creates uncertainty and security concerns.

Refugee camps provide, by contrast, a relatively safe and stable educational environment. According to a recent report, in all but one camp the rate of enrollment for young people of school age was 99%. (ZOA 2005: 17) Although students complain that classrooms are crowded and noisy, high turnover rate among teachers indicates the difficulties they face in teaching under such conditions, and security concerns are by no means eliminated, the fact that the vast majority of young people have the opportunity to learn is significant. (ZOA 2005: 20)

For exiles and migrants in Thailand, the opportunity for education is much less dependable. Uncounted millions of Burmese people live illegally or as guest workers in Thailand, some driven away from their homes by violence, some seeking economic opportunities unavailable at home, and others going into exile for political reasons. Some utilize the Thai education system, or are able to access educational programs offered by local or international NGOs. Most, however, must focus on survival and are deterred from seeking out educational opportunities by the fear of repatriation. The Shan, who will be discussed in this category of migrants and exiles, face particular difficulty because that the Royal Thai Government (RTG) has prevented the UNHCR from accessing the Shan population in Thailand, as the RTG believes the Shan to be ethnically related to the Thai and thus able to survive without outside assistance. (Refugees International 2004) As the RTG does not consider them to be refugees, the Shan have had to rely on community support networks and to found schools of their own initiative.

In ceasefire areas, the opportunity to learn varies according to the local situation. In urban centers or larger towns, there are likely to be more opportunities, whereas more remote areas may lack resources. Additionally, the tenuous relationship between ceasefire organizations and the SPDC (State Peace and Development Committee, the

Burmese military regime) places the future of the schools run by ceasefire groups in limbo.

In ethnic nationality areas controlled by organized groups, schooling is also likely to be unstable. Ongoing fighting between organized groups and the SPDC can create disruptions that make continuity in education difficult. Boundaries change quickly; people are often forced to flee, abandoning their homes and schools.

The spectrum of educational options available in these contexts creates tensions and opportunities. Groups that are unable to access refugee camps may envy the educational resources available there, and even enter camps in order to access those resources. The SPDC has “rewarded” organized groups that have made ceasefires with some measure of autonomy; these more stable educational situations may be resented by those outside the ceasefire areas. Furthermore, those who are in a position to access the resources of NGOs in Thailand may be seen as fortunate by those who do not have these connections. These tensions should be kept in mind in any discussion of education on the border.

Controversy over history curricula

For many Burmese educators in exile, camps, or ceasefire areas, the history curriculum is especially controversial. Several participants in a curriculum development seminar noted that history lessons in Burmese state textbooks were “one-sided” because they favored “Burmese feudalism and the military junta” and needed to be rewritten; they were not “real history.” (NHEC 2002: 57-59)

There are various ideas about what should replace the SPDC’s history curriculum. One common position is that the history curriculum should be based on “true and acceptable facts and figures,” although, given past conflicts among ethnic groups, it is difficult to envision consensus about what these would include; each ethnic group might teach their children different facts, thus causing confusion in the future. (NHEC 2002: 58)

Some educators feel that a revised history curriculum should “promote nationalism,” but that goal is not without perils. One educational specialist explains the problem this way:

On the one hand, the government’s curriculum leads to Burmanisation, and on the other, the school curricula in ethnic nationality areas induce excessive nationalism, which can lead to xenophobia.⁵ (Prospect Burma 2003)

The challenge that the ethnic nationality groups face in their collaboration is to come up with guidelines for a curriculum that will be acceptable to all groups without silencing anyone.

⁵ “Burmanisation” refers to the enforcement of Burman culture and language, as well as Theravada Buddhism, on ethnic minority groups.

Why is the history of Burma so controversial?

The history of Burma is controversial because political circumstances have created a variety of competing historical narratives. Pre-colonial, British colonial, Burmese nationalist, ethnic nationalist, and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council - military regime in Burma) histories offer five different meta-narratives about Burma, each associated with specific political goals. In order to understand the tensions involved, it is necessary to know a little about these various histories.

The main pre-colonial histories of Burma are chronicles inscribed on palm leaves, commissioned by kings of Burman, Shan, Arakanese, Mon, and other empires. These chronicles detail military and economic affairs, the lives of royalty, and supernatural omens. These histories served several purposes: enhancing the kings' spiritual and political prestige, illustrating the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence, and eventually, displaying the Burmans' national unity and strength to the British who were threatening their empire. (Lieberman 1987; Aung-Thwin 1982; Myint-U 2001)

When the British colonized and mapped the borders of Burma in the 19th century, they rejected the pre-colonial histories as superstitious and unreliable. They wrote new histories that strove for scientific accuracy while reversing the chronicles' narrative of unity to one of ethnic division. (Scott and Hardiman 1900) Following the racialist craze of the day, British historians argued that the "national characters" of the different ethnic groups—the warlike Shan, the peaceful Karen, and the dominating Burmans—had caused violent conflicts that only the British had been able to pacify. (Phayre 1969: 88; Cochrane 1915: 77) Thus, the British effectively wrote themselves into the history of Burma and justified their divide and rule policy of separating Burman-majority "ministerial Burma" from the "Frontier Areas" where many ethnic nationality groups lived. (Milne 1910; Cochrane 1915; Christian 1942)

The next major revision of history came with the Burmese nationalist movement beginning in the 1920s and gaining power after independence in 1948. Nationalists returned to the theme of peace and Burman hegemony emphasized in the chronicles, attacking not only the British, but also the historical narrative they had promoted. (Aung 1967) The British, they claimed, had sown disunity between the Burmans and ethnic nationality groups through their racialist policies.⁶ The Union of Burma, then, was not a new country, but a re-establishment of a pre-colonial entity.⁷

Ethnic nationality groups, meanwhile, developed their own historical narratives. Most ethnic groups had (and still have) oral histories that explained their origins and linked their people to spirits, gods, or Buddha. As with most indigenous histories, the purpose was not to record facts, but to preserve culture. (Smith 1999) In the post-colonial era, many ethnic nationalist historians produced modern histories that attempted to illustrate their groups' long histories as independent states that should now have the right to self-governance. (Yawnghwe 1987; Po 1926) Fascinatingly, many quoted directly from British colonial historians' accounts of Burman aggression, reversing the Burmese nationalist narrative of unity. (Mangrai 1965: 50; Yawnghwe 1987: 47)

⁶ See U Nu's Union Day speech (Tinker 1983: 771).

⁷ See U Nu's speech after the assassination of Aung San (Department of Information and Broadcasting 1949: 60).

When General Ne Win executed a military coup in 1962, his rationale was to preserve national unity amidst a rash of political and ethnic insurgencies. The junta, therefore, developed their history curriculum in an atmosphere of extreme ethnic tension. The SPDC's current history curriculum resembles the Burmese nationalist narrative. Third Standard textbooks begin with ancient Burman kings, connecting the SPDC's legitimacy as rulers to a classical past while justifying the actions they have taken to preserve the union. British colonists appear as the divisive villains of this narrative, which culminates in an eternal, peaceful Union of Burma. (Myanmar Ministry of Education 2001: 58-59)

In particular, the SPDC focuses on the events leading up to the formation of the Union of Burma in 1948. The agreement between independence leader Aung San and British Prime Minister Clement Attlee to join ethnic nationality areas with majority Burma areas is described as a mandate for union, although ethnic leaders did not participate. Furthermore, the Panglong Agreement, in which some ethnic groups agreed to become part of the Union of Burma on a temporary basis, is portrayed as a joyous pact between leaders finally freed from British meddling.

History education

I interviewed six people - representatives from the curriculum committees of the organizations that run schools that are independent of the SPDC and the Royal Thai Government. Three operate inside refugee camps in Thailand (All Burma Students Democratic Front, or ABSDF; Karenni National Progressive Party, or KNPP; and Karen Education Department, or KED, of the Karen National Union, or KNU). Two (Kachin Independence Organization, or KIO; and New Mon State Party, or NMSP) operate in cease-fire areas (areas in which organized ethnic groups have made ceasefires with the Burmese military regime and thus run schools that are semi-independent of the national curriculum). One organization (Shan Culture and Education Committee, or SCEC) operates in Thailand and serves exiles and migrants. Some of my interviewees were also their organization's representatives to the National Health and Education Committee (NHEC) for education issues. The interviews were conducted mostly in English, with a few Burmese words or sentences mixed in. Most were tape-recorded and then transcribed; in one case, I took notes instead.

The interview methodology I used was similar to what Patton (1990: 283-4) describes as an "interview guide" approach. This method emphasizes flexibility, situational sensitivity, and open-ended responses. Instead of coming up with a sequence of specific questions, I provided a framework of topics for discussion: the current history curriculum, the textbooks in use, plans for future development of the history curriculum, attitude toward collaboration with other ethnic nationality education departments on history curricula that would be appropriate for use in a future federal union, methodologies for teaching history, the connection between learning about history in school and outside of school, and general attitude toward teaching history.

I analyzed the interviews phenomenologically, drawing out the themes, essences, structures, and patterns that my interviewees expressed. (See Merriam 2002: 93) I used this type of analysis rather than a quantitative, survey-based format because I wanted to understand how people talked about the history curriculum—what

information they thought was relevant for me to know. In this sense, I was trying to act in line with what Lederach (1996: 55) calls an “elicitive” approach, using local vocabulary as a resource to respond to the needs of people in their own context, rather than imposing an outside structure.

While the interviews went well overall, some problems deserve mention. First, because several groups are in the process of modifying or redesigning their curricula, I could not see the latest version—some of the information I include here may be outdated (especially since I conducted this research three years ago). Furthermore, language or comprehension problems sometimes arose that I identified only in retrospect. It was not always clear whether the comments the interviewees made were their own opinions or the policies of their organizations; since I interviewed only one person from each organization, internal debate over history education or differences in attitude based on socio-political factors may be obscured. Each interviewee had a chance to look over my work before publication, but some points may remain unclear.

All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF)

The ABSDF is a majority Burman pro-democracy group that operates schools inside a refugee camp in Northern Thailand. I spoke with a representative of ABSDF’s education department in Chiang Mai on February 18, 2003. ABSDF uses the SPDC textbook to teach history, but they only use the parts of the textbook that they feel are appropriate for students. The representative explained that because the history of Burma is so complex and people have such strong feelings about it, students should learn basic information that everyone can agree on—such as how the British and Japanese invaded Burma. Because focusing on the details could cause misunderstandings and create disunity, the ABSDF feels it is better to avoid these controversial topics in order to promote peace for now.

The representative explained that he could see history from two perspectives. On one hand, history is important because it is important to remember our identities and the events that have happened in the past in order to avoid mistakes in the future. On the other hand, it is the present and future that are most important.

The representative noted that the ABSDF does not have plans to develop new history curricula. He explained that the study of history is controversial all over the world, not only in Burma, because everywhere, the winners of military victories had the chance to write histories while other groups did not. Therefore, ABSDF would want to consult with scholars of history before developing a new curriculum. Because the members of ABSDF’s education department are not educational technicians or philosophers, they feel uncomfortable developing curriculum on their own.

Furthermore, the representative noted that curriculum development is not a top priority for the ABSDF. Political change to democracy must come first, and then attention can be given to the curriculum; organizing people to campaign for democracy does not require changing the history curriculum. He suggested that perhaps after a decade of democracy, people would be ready to begin to revise the history curriculum.

The ABSDF representative emphasized that any new history curriculum should give positive messages to students about unity and respect for each other. Because students of one ethnicity may have no direct experience with those of other ethnicities, they could develop stereotypes of other ethnicities based on events described in history texts. If one group had historically oppressed others, the students might conclude that all people from that group are oppressive. Instead, students should learn from direct experience about each other:

If we don't know each other, each other's background or character, but we can experience staying together, we would learn to live together, we would go together, we would work together...After that, we would understand and respect each other.

Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)

The KNPP is a majority Karenni group that runs schools inside refugee camps in Thailand. I spoke with a representative of the KNPP in Mae Hong Son on February 27, 2003. The organization currently teaches history from documents and books written by Burmese historians or by foreigners in foreign languages, but they cannot be sure whether these sources are true or not because they were mostly based on foreigners' experiences. The Karenni did not have any history of the Karenni written in the Karenni language by Karenni people.

The KNPP has decided to write a new curriculum because the old one is not satisfactory to them. To develop a more reliable record, they collected recordings of elderly people and compared it to what had been written by foreigners. Most people could only speak about what had happened in one area over their lifetime, but by collecting all these records and analyzing them, they could come up with a bigger picture.

In developing the new curriculum, the representative explained that the KNPP's education department talked to teachers and students and asked for their suggestions. However, most of them could not make any comments or suggestions, because the material was new to them and they were not sure which way of teaching was better. The representative learned that most students did not know very much about history. Students and teachers learned history from their parents and grandparents, but they were not sure whether it was true or not.

The KNPP, with the assistance of an independent, foreign curriculum developer, planned to complete their new history curriculum in 2003. KNPP leaders will review it before implementation. The leaders will give advice on what should be included in the curriculum, and get suggestions on it.

Not only the content of the curriculum, but also the way of teaching, would change. Teachers could prepare different activities, not just "hold a book and talk." Unless the teacher is skillful, the students will not be interested. The KNPP representative commented that "The job of a teacher is simple, but it is not easy." New methods were required to meet students' needs.

This new history curriculum includes the history of the Karenni people and the history of Southeast Asia. For the section on Southeast Asia, they use parts of a textbook from Singapore. History will be taught from 5th to 10th standards. 5th standard covers the beginnings of the Karenni people and where they're from. In 6th standard, cultural festivals that continue to this day are discussed. 7th standard describes the 1800s and 1900s. In 8th standard, the curriculum addresses the relationship between the Karenni and the British. 9th standard is about WWII. 10th standard covers what happened after 1948 when the Karenni area fell into the hands of the Burmese.

The representative gave me an overview of the history of the Karenni people that the new curriculum presents. It begins with the Karenni people's origins in Mongolia and their migration across the Gobi desert and into Karenni state in 739 B.C. Because there was no Karenni script at that time, there are no written records. When the British arrived, they recognized Karenni independence. When the British left Burma, the Karenni did not want to join hands with the other groups and did not attend the Panglong Conference where other groups agreed to join the Union on a for a trial period of ten years. Today, the SPDC forces the Karenni people to serve as military porters and minesweepers.

For the time being, KNPP plans to use this curriculum only in the refugee camps in Thailand. If it worked well, they could introduce it in Karenni state. The representative did not think this curriculum would be suitable to use in a future federal union of Burma, because focused only on the Karenni people. If the Karenni people decide to join a federal union, they would have to look at the curriculum again, and include relationships with other ethnic people. The representative felt that the history curriculum for a federal union would be much different than what they had just developed because it would be a common curriculum. However, he predicted that the ethnic nationalities would demand to learn their own history as well, in order to preserve their past. Most ethnic groups, he noted, want to preserve their history, culture, beliefs, and religion. He noted how challenging it would be to figure out a way to teach history in a future federal union of Burma.

The representative stated that this curriculum was intended to help the students know reality of the past and present, not to make them oppose neighboring countries or nations, nor to fight against them. He observed that most students heard about these conflicts from family or friends, or experienced them firsthand, so teachers wouldn't need to explain the conflicts in detail.

The KNPP representative explained that it is important for students to be able to apply what they learn, not only to gain more knowledge, but so they can understand what is happening in the world now. For instance, the representative explained that he had not been allowed to learn Karenni history in an SPDC school. All the ethnic people complained, even in their own areas and schools, they were not allowed to learn their histories or languages. Any curriculum guidelines would have to allow each group to learn their own histories.

Karen Education Department (KED) of the Karen National Union (KNU)

The KED is the educational wing of the KNU, a majority Karen group that operates schools inside refugee camps in Thailand and in certain areas inside Karen State,

Burma. I interviewed a representative of the KED in Mae Sot on March 4, 2003. He told me that the Karen now use a history book that was written in 1958. It uses histories written by Karen scholars who were educated during colonial times.

Their history curriculum covers the entrance of the Karen into Burma in the year 742 BC and continues through the Karen revolution in the 1950s. They begin teaching history in 5th standard with the origins of the Karen people and continue chronologically until 10th standard. The representative explained that in the SPDC areas of Karen state, parents often told their children about the Karen history that they were not allowed to learn in school. Still, many Karen inside Burma do not know their own history.

Although the curriculum has not been changed since 1958, the KED now has plans to review their curriculum every three years to decide if they want to revise it. A committee looked at the old curriculum for each subject, and then they took material from other sources, discussed it, and made revisions. Then the curriculum committees reviewed the new material and made suggestions for improvement. They sent the curriculum to schools, and the teachers made comments on it too. They used these suggestions to make the final draft of the curriculum and sent it to be printed. They are now in the process of writing the history from 1974 until the present, but it is not yet finished.

Now, the KED is working with a Dutch NGO—the KED writes the curriculum and the NGO prints it. The KED has not consulted other ethnic nationality education departments, and the curriculum they design will be only for the Karen refugee camps and the areas of Karen state inside Burma that do not have to use the SPDC curriculum. They face the challenge of balancing the level of education in the camps and inside Burma.

In the future, the KED will revise the social studies curriculum to include different political systems, religions, as well as environmental education and the life of Karen people in each area. This material was scheduled to have been finished in 2005. The representative explained that the KED was interested in working with other ethnic nationality groups on developing curriculum in the future, perhaps through the NHEC's program. He predicted that the success of a curriculum for a future federal union of Burma depended on whether or not the different ethnic nationalities could agree on a curriculum. The Karen, he noted, were prepared to begin this process, because they had been working on curriculum development for a long time and placed a high priority on education. It might be harder for states with diverse ethnic groups, such as Shan state, to develop a curriculum.

Developing curriculum guidelines or a common curriculum would be difficult because groups had different ideas about history. The representative noted that history written by the Burmans and Mons focused on the monarchy and the leaders. He described how many Karen people had a different idea about history:

Before the Mon arrived to Burma, our Karen already arrived to Burma. And...the Mon went to Burma and oppressed our Karen people....Most of our Karen people would like peace, would like to [live] silently, quietly. So they conquered [us] easily. They oppressed our Karen

people and our Karen history was lost. And the Mon, they wrote the history! And also, when Burmese monarchs conquered [the] Mon monarchy, after that they wrote [history].

The representative explained that all the ethnic groups had different perspectives even on the same events or people—the Mon see the Burmans as colonists, and view Burman kings as oppressors, not heroes. The Karen, on the other hand, maintain that famous kings of Burma, such as Tabinshweti (in Karen, Thanatusaw) were actually Karen, not Burman.

In spite of these differences, the representative emphasized that this history of conflict between the Karen and other groups did not mean that there has to be conflict in the future; the Karen history curriculum told students about the conflicts that had happened in the past, but “This is only the history. Now the situation is changed, and we need to make peace with each other. Now we need to organize, we need to live together.”

The representative explained that Karen teachers did not give the students ideas that would make them hate other groups, but that many Karen students had had violent experiences that influenced their perspectives on history. For example, SPDC soldiers had burned their villages and killed their families, so they were afraid of Burmans. Even if teachers did not tell students about these circumstances, the students knew it anyway, and they had strong feelings about it.

He explained that history is especially important to the Karen people because “if we do not have our Karen history, our nation will be lost.” For the Karen, education was the first priority—even before political change. Because “if we do this [education], our people will know about the [political] situation...” If they focused only on politics, the new generation would not be able to accomplish anything.

Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)

The KIO is a majority Kachin group that has made a ceasefire with the SPDC and operates schools in their autonomous zone in Kachin State, Burma. I interviewed a teacher from Kachin State in Bangkok on April 2, 2003.

The teacher informed me that the KIO currently teaches history from the SPDC textbook, and that the 1994 ceasefire agreement has had implications for how students learn history. Kachin students were allowed to begin taking the high school final examination that leads to further study inside Burma. In order to succeed on the history section of this exam, students must know the content of the SPDC textbook; for the sake of their children’s future, the KIO has decided to use SPDC textbooks in schools even though many people do not agree with the textbook version of history.

KIO schools teach history from a Kachin perspective in addition to using the SPDC curriculum. They begin in kindergarten by teaching children to read and write the Kachin language. In 3rd and 4th standards, the children begin to learn old stories about Kachin culture and history from Kachin textbooks.

From 7th until 10th standard, students learn about the history of the Kachin revolution, culminating in an exam paper. This course uses documents and sources collected by the KIO education department, including the autobiographies or biographies of Kachin revolutionary leaders. The course covers the reasons for the Kachins' 1961 revolt against government control. It stresses that U Nu's government broke the Panglong Agreement by not giving the Kachin equal status and offended the mostly Christian Kachin by trying to make Buddhism the state religion.

The teacher explained why it was important for Kachin students to learn about the history of the revolution:

Now some younger generations, they don't know why we are fighting, so somebody asked me, "Why we are fighting like this? Why can't we stay together...?"... We have to have some documents, some books, so they can read and they can learn from that.

In other words, students must understand the past in order to understand the present. In this case, the KIO's curriculum directly contradicts the post-colonial history in the SPDC textbooks, leaving students with two parallel narratives. In addition, students also learn about history outside of school; elders and families are important resources for students. Furthermore, the students themselves have had experiences that they can compare with what they learn in school, and by criticizing and analyzing texts, they can understand history better.

The teacher also pointed out that students absorb the messages from the history curriculum without being explicitly told. For instance, she argued, Thai teachers never tell their students that they should hate Burmese people, but because they teach that the Burmese destroyed the Thai kingdom of Ayuthaya, the Thai students develop negative feelings toward Burmese people. Thus, history curricula affect students' feelings and attitudes as well as their intellectual knowledge. For this reason, curriculum development is a high priority for the teacher; she feels that educators should be careful and deliberate about the material they put in the curriculum, since it has such strong effect on students.

In the future, the KIO education department has plans to compile their materials on the Kachin revolution into a textbook. However, they face some obstacles. The Kachin, unlike the Karen and Karenni, do not have the advantage of having camps where foreign NGOs can provide educational support, teacher training, and opportunities for further study—it is difficult for foreigners to access areas inside Kachin state. As a result, the KIO must do the best they can on their own. The teacher is enthusiastic about working with other ethnic nationality education departments to develop curriculum guidelines, and supported NHEC's efforts to work on this project.

New Mon State Party (NMSP)

The NMSP is a majority Mon organization that has made a ceasefire with the SPDC. THE NMSP runs schools in some areas in Thailand as well as some areas in Mon State inside Burma. I spoke with an NMSP representative in Chiang Mai on March 23, 2003. He told me that about 190 schools use an NMSP textbook at the primary

level (3-7 standard). At a secondary level, they use the SPDC textbook because they do not have their own. He pointed out that this arrangement depends on the ceasefire between SPDC and NMSP—if it breaks down and SPDC takes over NMSP areas entirely, they will no longer be able to use their own textbook.

When using the SPDC textbooks, Mon teachers sometimes adapt or change the material. For example, while the SPDC textbook says that March 2 is *taun thu leh thama ne*, (Peasants' Day), but the Mon teachers tell the students that in reality, this day marks the anniversary of when General Ne Win took over the country in a military coup in 1962. The representative feels that it is important that students learn to compare interpretations like these two.

The NMSP textbook contains a short chapter on the history of the Mon people. This chapter discusses mostly the history of kings, prophets, and soldiers, going back to the time of the Buddha but not including modern times. This history is not based on reality, but includes stories and dreams rather than dates and places. The representative is not satisfied with this chapter, but hopes to expand it by adding information about Mon and other peoples' histories.

NMSP has plans to develop a new textbook and history curriculum in the future. They have been working on this project since 1993 and are now gathering international ideas about curriculum design. The representative explained that the goals of a curriculum development process should spring from a thorough needs assessment of the Mon community. Outside academics could then use the educational theories most appropriate to Mon goals to write the curriculum. Then, the curriculum should be tested through student assessment, and revised as necessary.

The representative emphasized that the curriculum should not cause Mon students to hate Burmese people, but only to know about them through analysis and critical thinking. Students should learn to decide what versions of history are right or wrong. He pointed out that students would not finish their education in NMSP schools, but might go on to higher education, and they needed to be prepared for further study that would require these skills.

The representative noted that when ethnic nationality groups develop new curricula, they should keep in mind not only their own groups, but also all the other ethnic groups. "When we prepare or write, or provide ideas, we should think not only for our people, we should think all the ethnic groups, [and] in the final we can focus only for our [own group]." He was also interested in hearing the ideas of the Education Research Bureau from inside Burma. He predicted that whichever group tried to develop curriculum, they would involve their own ideas, but that a multicultural curriculum could help to include everyone's point of view.

The representative noted that reconciling the histories of different ethnic nationality groups was difficult because groups thought of their own kings as heroes. However, "from one side he is a hero, from another side, he is not a hero...We say, one king 'fights' another ethnic country, they say he 'organizes' and 'develops' it!" These differences in perspective make it difficult to talk about history without arguing.

The representative also pointed out that the long history of fighting between groups such as the Mon and Burmese still influenced people's behavior. He viewed these

conflicts as caused by the “habits of kings” rather than by the activities of the people. Any king, from Alaungpaya to Napoleon, tried to expand his territory and conquer other people—this kind of ancient history should not prevent ethnic nationality groups from working together and respecting each other in the present.

Shan Culture and Education Committee (SCEC)

The SCEC is a Shan majority organization that runs schools in Thailand and in areas of Shan State, Burma, controlled by the Shan State Army (SSA). I spoke with a representative of the SCEC in Chiang Mai on March 31, 2003. He explained that in most parts of Shan state, the authorities force teachers to use SPDC textbooks. The textbooks emphasize the negative qualities of Thai people, who are close ethnic relatives of the Shan.

The Shan do have their own history books, but because they do not have refugee camps, they are only just starting to use their textbooks in schools they have established in Thailand. The first Shan history textbooks were developed during and after WWII by learned Shan people, leaders, and historians. These textbooks included old stories, biographies of Shan contemporary leaders, and descriptions of old Shan kings. After Ne Win’s coup in 1962, the government claimed that these textbooks were rebel textbooks and contained propaganda for federalism, so they banned the Shan textbooks.

The SCEC schools use these older textbooks as well as newer ones on important people in Shan state. The SCEC recently developed several new textbooks on history. One covers heroes of the world, and another shows how different Shan people live throughout Southeast Asia, China, and India. There is a book of collected documents and excerpts from books related to Shan history, and a textbook on the political history of Shan state used in middle and upper standards.

This last textbook, first written by SSA leader Sao Kwan Mung in 1986 and re-approved in 2000, includes the geography and society of Shan State. It covers the early history of the Shan, their origins in China, how they lived during the time of the Burmese kings, and how the Shan leaders related to and revolted against the Burmese kings. The textbook then moves on to British colonial times and the drawing of boundaries that separated the many groups of Shan people. The book explains the situation during WWII, the Aung San-Atlee Agreement, the Panglong Agreement, and the situation after ten years of independence. It mentions that the Burmese leaders broke the Panglong Agreement and that the people of the Shan state democratically rose up against the government even after Ne Win began oppressing every ethnic group in the country. The last chapter describes all of the revolutionary groups that have operated in Shan state, and the unity of the Shan people.

The representative explained that this textbook had a particular political point of view, and that teachers must explain to their students that the textbook represented the ideas of its author. The SCEC hopes to make a less politically biased textbook in the future. Another 1996 book on Shan history, by Nang Hkur Sen, now spokeswoman of the Shan State Army (SSA), thoroughly and critically analyzes different perspectives on Shan history. This book could be used in schools or read outside of school.

The representative hoped that in the future, the SCEC could work with learned Shan people in the USA, educational technicians, and people from inside Burma to improve their textbooks. The SCEC has formed a committee to work on textbooks, but only a few people are available to work on it in the same location. They also suffer from a lack of funding: “We cannot do it alone.” The SCEC plans to first make a draft of new textbooks, then test them.

The SCEC also plans to develop new methodologies and train teachers to teach history in a balanced way that interests students: “If you cannot teach well, conflict can happen, students can criticize you and say that you are one-sided.” For instance, using oral history in school could help students apply what they learn.

SCEC has also expressed interest in collaborating with other ethnic nationality education departments; it would be easy to do so in subjects like science, math, and English, and more difficult in subjects like history. However, the representative explained that ethnic groups might be very interested in each other’s history, because it was all connected: “If you say the history of Burma, you cannot leave out Mon, Shan, Karen...living together, we created the history.” He also noted that learning about each other’s history was important to the future peace and stability of the country.

He emphasized that it is especially important that students understand what happened during the independence era:

If we don’t explain it to the students, the next time they will have the same problem... We should say how we tried to make a union, why we cannot build unity, maybe something is wrong with us, we have to know...Also about peace and democracy, conflict resolution... Why did the conflict happen, why can’t we solve it?

He also noted that it was important to collaborate with Burmans to incorporate their perspectives; if the Burmans wrote the curriculum alone, they might not include minorities and then no one would agree to it, but if everyone worked together, they could come to an agreement. Instead of just telling the stories of kings attacking each other, which gives students the impression that ethnic groups were always fighting, the representative wanted students to “respect each other, know each other’s history...We have to know each other’s history to improve and check our own. We have to know our weakness.”

In a future federal union, this cooperation would be especially important. For all of these reasons, the representative hoped to see more collaboration between different ethnic nationality education departments on the history curriculum. All of this work on curriculum development should be started as soon as possible: “If we don’t start now, we are wasting time.”

Differences and commonalities among history curricula

The information in these interviews supports the assertion that history curricula impact students’ ethnic prejudices. Most interviewees mentioned that teaching history

has the potential to create hatred among groups. None cited prejudice as a goal of their history curriculum, but most acknowledged that it could be a by-product. In other words, students get secondary understandings (or, as educational philosopher John Dewey (1967: 48) describes it, “collateral learning”) from their education about how they should behave. Because the history of Burma is fraught with violence, students will probably incorporate these secondary understandings unless a concerted effort is made to avoid them. Therefore, any curriculum designed to support multi-ethnic civil society should include strategies for confronting this dynamic.

It is also clear that history curricula are tied to political goals. The descriptions given by interviewees confirmed that history curricula are intended to lead students toward particular political positions. For instance, the focus on the early dates at which certain ethnic groups migrated into Burma or established kingdoms may be included to promote nationalism and bolster separatist claims. Furthermore, the requirement that non-educational leaders of political organizations review history curricula before they are implemented implies that information could be rejected on a political basis. Indeed, because history education has long been politicized in Burma—first by the British, and currently by the SPDC—to the effect of silencing various ethnic groups, it is understandable that the right to present specific historical information is seen as a matter of political and cultural survival.

Still, in some cases, it is necessary to extricate historical claims from political goals. It is a reflection of the situation in Burma that ethnic groups feel, perhaps justifiably, that they will not gain basic human rights unless they have a measure of self-determination. Often, when ethnic minority groups present themselves to the humanitarian community or to bodies such as the UN, they describe themselves as having lived in peace since time immemorial in order to validate their identity as a group deserving of aid and recognition.⁸ However, a long historical legacy of independence should not be a prerequisite for humane treatment, and present demands for uncontroversial, universally-deserved freedoms are only weakened by association with controversial historical claims. Furthermore, in reality, groups are no more likely to gain rights if they arrived in Burma in 800 BC and spawned a powerful dynasty of kings, than if they arrived in 500 AD and never had much political power.

However, tying curricula to political or social goals is not necessarily negative; indeed, it is practically unavoidable, and any curriculum designer who claimed to be writing a politically neutral curriculum free of normative messages would be deluded. (Apple 1990) The challenge is to agree on political goal - for instance, multi-ethnic civil society - and be sure that the curricula are aligned with it.

A curriculum with a political message need not discourage critical thinking among students. Most interviewees noted their organizations’ interest in departing from traditional Burmese teacher-centered models of education based on rote memorization, which teach students to take a passive role in the learning process. A history of conflict such as Burma’s provides a unique opportunity for students to analyze various sources, debate their merits, and draw independent conclusions—all important skills for participation in a multi-ethnic civil society.

⁸ Many thanks to Pia Vogler for sharing experiences from the UN Working Group for Minorities and the UN Working Group for Indigenous Peoples, and more broadly, for her very helpful advice in preparing this article.

Even if the political goals and teaching methodologies are agreed upon, the content is still debatable. Most groups seem more certain of what is *not* true than what is true; in other words, they know a lie when they hear it, but may not feel confident in constructing truth. Part of the reason for this lack of confidence is the paucity of sources available on ethnic nationalities. Groups seem torn between sticking to traditional sources (oral histories) and meeting standards for historical truth set by outsiders. Few ethnic minority historians are trained in an internationally recognized way, so foreign experts or NGOs—who may not be entirely trusted by the community—are brought in to assist. In this type of situation, inclusiveness is essential. History curricula must make room for the oral histories that reinforce cultural identity as well as for a variety of primary and secondary sources that will introduce a measure of historical rigor and thoroughness.

Whatever groups decide to include in the curriculum, it is clear from the interviews that a large part of students' education about history happens outside the classroom. Families, communities, and media supply historical narratives in various forms. In addition, students have had direct and often violent experiences that influence their understanding of history. It would be quixotic to ignore these realities. Indeed, the problem with omitting controversial topics from the history curriculum is that students then form their perceptions based on information gleaned outside of school that may not be reliable or balanced. Instead, students' experiences and prior knowledge should be explicitly addressed in the classroom and used as a starting point for instruction.

Finally, it is clear from these interviews that groups can benefit from discussing their history curricula. Most groups acknowledged that it was important for all Burmese children to learn about other ethnic groups as well their own. Many are attempting similar types of curriculum revision, and may be able to pool resources or share ideas. All interviewees acknowledged that it would be difficult to agree upon a history curriculum acceptable for all groups, but many had remarkably nuanced understandings of each other's positions and anxieties; this bodes well for a negotiation process.

Collaboration could produce more comprehensive materials than exist today. Interestingly, all groups except the majority Burman ABSDF advocated telling students in detail about Burma's history of violence; perhaps Burmans are more likely to fear the prejudices that may be aroused, while ethnic nationalities feel they have a moral high ground and can only gain by airing their grievances. However, any serious examination of the history of Burma will reveal a complex situation in which no ethnic group can be condemned or exonerated wholesale.

Although the future of inter-ethnic collaboration on curricula is bound up with the slow-moving process of political change in Burma, it is worth anticipating the struggles that are likely arise if a common textbook were to be developed. In this regard, the importance of language cannot be overestimated. While the outline of ethnic nationalities' history curricula was often similar, the adjectives and verbs involved differed markedly. For instance, the Mon might say that their king "organized" the Karen, whereas the Karen might use the word "oppressed." The SPDC textbook says that General Aung San "organized" the ethnic nationality groups, whereas the KNPP textbook says that he "manipulated" them. These differences are complicated by the translation issues that arise in a multi-lingual context. The process

of collaboration on curricula would be a lengthy one; tensions could arise between a thorough consensus process and a reasonable time-frame for implementation.

Furthermore, the writers of any textbook designed for a future federal union of Burma would face a choice between inclusion of every event and perspective deemed important, or exclusion of anything considered inappropriate or inaccurate. The overlap of these conflicting mandates has the potential to create gridlock. Collaboration could result in a short, basic textbook that includes only uncontroversial facts, or an unmanageably long, detailed textbook that includes every possible perspective on a wide variety of events. If the issue of scope divides groups now, it will certainly continue to do so as they work together more closely. However, as should be clear from these interviews, there is cause for hope in the many dedicated, sensitive educators devoting their energy to the question of history education.

Finally, the unequal distribution of educational resources across the contexts of refugee camps, ethnic nationality areas, cease-fire areas, and exile clearly affects the possibilities for curriculum development and collaboration. Groups from all areas expressed frustrations with the political, economic, or logistical limitations of the situations in which they ran schools. The inequalities inherent in the educational contexts on the Thai-Burma border cannot easily be brought into equilibrium. Curriculum development strategies that may be practical in one area may be out of reach in another. Awareness of the specific needs of educators and students in each context may be the first step toward addressing these inequalities in the future.

Theoretical and practical recommendations

Educational theories offer some guidance relevant to supporting multi-ethnic civil society through history education. I will discuss several educational approaches (multicultural education, pluralism, experiential education, popular education, and peace education) that offer guidance to educators dealing with the issues that emerged in the interviews.

Every group wants students to understand their own culture and history and, to some extent, the cultures and histories of other groups inside and outside Burma. The challenge is balancing these parts of the curriculum. Multicultural education scholar Emily Style (1999) describes this balance through the metaphor of curriculum as a window and a mirror. Curriculum mirrors students to the extent that it validates their experiences and offers familiarity; it acts as a window in the sense that it allows students to see outside their own experiences and communities. In developing new curricula, educators should therefore ensure that all students find both a mirror and a window. These dynamics reinforce each other; students begin to see aspects of their own experience in their studies of other cultures, thus broadening their humanistic values and ability to participate in a multi-ethnic civil society.

Another common refrain from the interviews was that students should know the truth about history. However, interviewees were wary of the problems that could arise when different groups put forth competing truths. It is important to note that the existence of multiple versions of history is not, in itself, negative; rather, it is the inability to accept this state of affairs that can lead to problems. Indeed, historiographers have pointed out that debate from multiple perspectives is one of the

key distinguishing features of the modern academic discipline of history. (Southgate 2001; Jenkins 1997)

Moreover, these debates offer students a point of entry into historical inquiry. Gerda Lerner (1997) points out that what historians do—comparing and choosing sources in order to give form and meaning to the past—is similar to what each person does in constructing personal memories; in this sense, each human is a “practicing historian.” If students are exposed to multiple accounts of history from an early age, they can develop a pluralism that is essential to a multi-ethnic civil society. Maxine Greene (1988) explains that the goal of education should be “open-ended inquiry” rather than “true belief”—students develop “democratically liberated consciousness” that enables them to rethink their beliefs when they encounter new information. Indeed, Sam Wineburg (2001: ix) has suggested that one of the main purposes of history education is to help us “become uneasy—when necessary—about the stories we tell.” Thus our methodologies may lead students to become less sure, rather than more sure, about historical truth.

Many interviewees expressed an interest in exploring student-centered education. Experiential education, pioneered by John Dewey (1938), provides a useful starting point. Dewey argued that students learn best from experiences, carefully chosen by the teacher, that draw on students’ physical and social surroundings. A history curriculum based on experiential learning would help students understand history’s connection to their lives. “How shall the young,” Dewey (1938: 23) asks, “be acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a appreciation of the living present?” Instead of memorizing names and dates, students can have experiences that confirm the relevance of history today.

Paolo Freire’s theories of popular education and critical pedagogy are also helpful in centering students in the learning process. Freire (1970) argued against a “banking” method of education, in which teachers “deposit” knowledge into students, in favor of a model in which students’ prior knowledge is a starting point for inquiry that leads toward a more just and equitable society. A history curriculum based on popular education would be appropriate here because it brings into the classroom the knowledge students already have from their own experiences, their families, and their communities. Especially because many students have not had much formal education, and because what they learn in school might contradict what they have heard, it is important to explore the insights they already have. As Wineburg (2001) points out, determining prior knowledge is an essential ground for the history curriculum.

Most groups expressed that they wanted their curricula to promote harmony, and a peace education approach offers guidelines for reducing violence and creating a “culture of peace.” This method, pioneered by Johann Galtung, is now used internationally by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) and many others. Peace education teaches children to oppose intolerance, “the belief that one’s own group, belief system, or way of life is superior to those of others,” and instead promote an “appreciation and respect for the human dignity and integrity of all persons.” (Reardon 1997: 2) In terms of the history curriculum, a peace education approach would attempt to undermine ethnic chauvinism while providing examples of inter-ethnic cooperation. Reardon notes that “the teaching of history has often been a factor in developing attitudes of hostility, exclusion, and prejudice towards others,” and she suggests that by encouraging

minority students to share their family stories, students can understand “another dimension” of the official record. (Reardon 1997: 67)

The peace education approach should be balanced with critical thinking and a focus on justice. Ilan Gur-Ze’ev (2001: 331) has pointed out that peace education can be a way for people in power to encourage oppressed groups to stop fighting for what they may deserve. The tension between identity and ethnocentrism is also obscured; Reardon writes that “aggressive nationalism” is a sign of intolerance, but she praises programs that teach refugee children to “preserve...national consciousness, a necessary basis for the reconstruction of their destroyed homeland.” (Reardon 1997: 79)

Feelings of pride about one’s ethnicity can form a healthy foundation for interaction with others, but these feelings can easily slip into chauvenism or prejudice; the difference between these two positions should be clearly articulated. Furthermore, UNESCO’s curriculum seems to place slogans (peace and tolerance are good, war and violence are bad) above critical thinking, perhaps accomplishing what Gayatri Spivak (2001: 30) calls “writing slogans in soft cement.” Indeed, the potential pitfalls of peace education remind us that no theory should be incorporated wholesale or seen as an ultimate solution; history education in the Burmese context is complex and requires multiple approaches.

Classroom activities designed to support multi-ethnic civil society

Moving from the theoretical to the practical, I will present instructions for and explain the purpose of ten classroom activities I have designed to use in teaching the history of Burma: defining history, creating personal-historical timelines, creating maps, sharing artifacts, inviting guest speakers, interviewing community members, acting out historical events, analyzing primary sources, rewriting secondary sources, and making books. Some of these ideas came out of my experiences working at the National Health and Educational Committee of Burma’s (NHEC’s) 2000-2001 teacher training, and subsequent trainings held by Teacher Training for Burmese Teachers (TTBT), another local NGO.⁹ The activities can be adapted to different ages and skill levels, and they are designed for situations in which traditional educational resources are scarce. They can be used with or without a textbook, but given the controversy over textbook content and the shortage of resources, most activities do not require a textbook. The activities are useful in classes with any mix of ethnicities.

Before beginning their inquiries, students should define history together. The teacher asks students to write down, and then work in groups to refine their definitions of history. Then the teacher introduces various “histories,” including textbooks, documents, old photographs, stories, objects, songs, poems, and maps. Student groups try to determine if these histories fit their definitions. The class discusses their efforts: did they agree about what was or wasn’t history? Did their definitions of history change over the course of the activity? Are all sources of equal value in studying

⁹ I would like to thank all the members of NHEC and TTBT for inviting me to participate in these teacher trainings, and I would like to thank the participants for contributing ideas that allowed me to refine these activities.

history? The teacher compiles a list of the students' definitions of history along with definitions provided by historians.

The purpose of defining history is to provide an introduction to the discipline. It is important that students understand that there are multiple definitions of history, and that the class will include various media. This activity sets the tone for tolerance of multiple perspectives and makes it clear that there are some questions for which there is not only one "right" answer. Students who may be used to teacher-centered rote learning become acquainted with group work and with sharing their opinions in class. They are introduced to primary and secondary sources and begin to look at their surroundings as a source of history. This activity also introduces the question of historical epistemology as students begin to evaluate different accounts of history and ponder which ones they trust most and why.

Creating timelines that connect personal events to historical events is a good way for students to continue their inquiries. The teacher explains how to construct a timeline, and instructs the students to create timelines of events in their lives. Outside of school, students consult family or community members to add events that happened before they were born. In class, students brainstorm historical events in or affecting Burma to add to their timelines. The teacher suggests important events they may have missed. The students write about how one historical event impacted them, and then share these compositions with other students. As the class progresses, these timelines can become references to which students can add new information, either collectively or individually.

The purpose of creating timelines is to activate students' prior knowledge, validate their experiences, and give them a chance to incorporate community knowledge by discussing history with relatives and elders. At the same time, teachers have a chance to convey basic information such as names and dates. The timelines help students understand chronology, change over time, and cause and effect relationships, as well as allowing them to see the connections between their lives and historical events; indeed, they begin to see themselves as historians. Tolerance of multiple perspectives is reinforced as they become aware that events may have impacted themselves and their classmates in different ways.

Creating maps is a complement to creating timelines. The teacher provides students with basic mapping skills, and students create maps of their communities, including whatever landmarks or illustrations they feel are important. Alternately, each student can be assigned a section of the community to map, and the maps can be joined together. Students then compare their maps with various types of maps of the locality, region, country, and world: topographical, political, resource, climate, physical, etc. They can also look at maps created by people in different places and times (ancient Burmese maps, British colonial maps, modern maps) to compare the different understandings of space that they convey. Students can display their maps in the classroom as reminders as they continue their studies.

Making maps gives students basic geographical concepts while reinforcing the point that people literally see the world in different ways. This activity validates indigenous understandings of space while introducing students to various ways of representing geography. As understanding maps is an essential part of studying history, this activity prepares students to analyze the world around them.

Sharing artifacts (“show-and-tell”) provides further opportunities for students to analyze the events on their timelines. The teacher instructs students to bring in an object that can teach the class something about history (for example, a piece of traditional clothing; a photograph; a coin; a hand-made tool; a CD). Students switch objects with another student, and then write down what information about history they can gather by looking at their classmate’s object. Students then present their classmates’ objects and their own objects to the class, explaining the insights these objects offer. The class discusses what they learned from the artifacts.

Sharing artifacts gives students a chance to do what historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists do in “reading” objects for historical meaning. Their imaginations are activated as they envision different conclusions that a historian could draw; indeed, they begin to see themselves as historians. For displaced students, this activity is a chance to share what they have been able to preserve of their homes. For those with few possessions, it places value on what they do have available to them.

Another way to enrich students’ understanding of events on their timelines is to invite guest speakers into the classroom. Teachers (or students) invite members of the community into the classroom to discuss events they remember vividly. The teacher provides background knowledge on the event and asks students to prepare questions for the speaker. They listen to the presentation and ask their questions, and later respond to the new information in class discussion and in writing. The students locate the event on their timeline and talk about how it fits into the rest of the events they are studying.

Guest speakers give the community, especially elders, a chance to participate in the students’ learning process. Students start to realize that they are surrounded by people with interesting stories to tell, and they may become more interested in history. Furthermore, students benefit from an oral tradition of history supplemented by written documents. Guest speakers also enable teachers to access information that was excluded from textbooks or is too recent to be in a textbook.

A natural continuation of the guest speaker experience is to ask students to interview a community member. The teacher models and discusses good interview skills, and students practice by interviewing each other about an event on their personal timelines. Alternately, students can take on the roles of various historical figures and interview each other in character. The teacher can provide them with prepared questions at first, and then encourage them to formulate their own questions. After they become confident interviewers, the teacher asks the students to find a family or community member whom they want to know more about. Or, the student can choose an event he or she would like to know more about, and then try to find someone who knows about it. After developing a list of questions and securing the teacher’s approval, the students conduct their interviews. They can record these interviews or take notes. Once the interview is completed, students can develop an essay or creative writing piece about the person or event.

An interview project lets students gain in-depth knowledge about an event, developing their confidence as a class “expert.” They also get to know their communities better, and vice versa. Students begin to understand the kinds of questions historians should ask, and they think like historians as they analyze the information they find. An interview project lets students pursue a particular area of

interest for them, so they will be likely to become involved in the process rather than being passive. The interviews can become the beginning of a community oral history project that extends beyond the classroom.

Acting out historical events is another way for students to learn. Teachers (or students) choose a particular event from history for the students to act out. Then, the teacher explains the event to the students, asks them to read about it in their textbook, or asks them to research it on their own if resources are available. Students then work in groups and discuss how they should perform the role-play, or the teacher assigns them roles. When the students have practiced their play, they perform it for the class. For younger students, these role-plays can be simple—some students are British colonists, some students are ethnic leaders meeting them for the first time. Older students can act out more elaborate scenes such as the signing of the Panglong Agreement.

Role-playing actively involves students in learning about the events on their timelines. It helps students understand the perspectives of different people in history and imagine what it would be like to live in a different time and place. Most importantly, it shows students that it is not necessary to agree with a certain position in order to understand it; a student portraying a British colonist in a role-play doesn't need to support British positions, but does need to portray the character convincingly. In so doing, the student learns to separate what happened from how he or she might feel about it. Role-playing also gives students a chance to enjoy moving around, being active, and using their creativity.

A necessary complement to “fun” activities such as role-plays is the analysis of primary sources. Older students look at primary sources such as the Constitution of their state, while younger ones might look at simple songs. Primary sources can also include photographs, statistics, letters, and diaries. Teachers ask questions about the content, purpose, and importance of the document. Students can write essays about why the document is important and the effect it had on other events.

Looking at primary sources gives students direct insight into what happened in the past. They can gain important information as well as asking critical questions and practicing their reading and writing skills. Students learn that they can access a source directly instead of relying on other people's interpretations of it. They also learn more about the raw material that historians use to construct their understandings of history.

Secondary sources are also important to studying history. Traditionally, textbooks are the basis of the history curriculum. The easiest way to use them is for the teacher to assign students material to read and have them answer questions about it or memorize it. However, because not all groups have developed textbooks they are satisfied with—and some are still using SPDC's textbook with certain parts excluded—the textbooks that do exist can be used to illustrate bias.

One valuable activity is “rewriting” textbooks. Teachers must first introduce the concept of bias, explain that each historian (and each person) is biased to some extent, and guide students in exploring their own biases. The teacher chooses an especially controversial event, and presents versions from two or more conflicting secondary sources. Students read these texts and take notes on differences, similarities, and biases they detect, adding their own information in the margins. The class discusses

their results. Then students break into groups discuss how they would rewrite the history of the same event by taking into account the information in the two texts as well as the information they have. Then they try to rewrite that paragraph in a way that is acceptable for all of them. The groups report back to the class and try to build consensus by combining their versions, and then discuss the bias that exists in their rewritten history.

The purpose of this activity is to empower students to construct their own accounts of history based on a critical analysis of the sources available to them. Again, they take on the role the historian as they evaluate evidence and determine the reliability of sources. As they do so, they realize what a difficult task historians face; they may become both more skeptical of blatantly ideological versions of history, and more admiring of balanced accounts. They also reflect on their own biases and question their beliefs. As they try to build consensus with other students, they may realize, on a meta-level, that the history curricula they have experienced (and are currently experiencing) have been constructed and contain biases as well.

A good culminating project for a history class is making a book. Students choose the events from their timeline that they think are most important. Then they write a description of their version of the historical events covered in the class, and they explain why these events are important. They make a simple book (folding paper in half and then stapling, sewing, or rubber-banding the fold) and write their history in it, along with illustrations or maps. After the students finish their books, they can switch with a classmate and read each other's books. Then the two students can talk about the similarities and differences between the books and between what they included and how they described the events.

Bookmaking allows students to think critically about which historical events are most important and to present their own conclusions about these events. They can focus on their own area of interest or tell the story of themselves or their families. By making their own books, students can confirm their understanding of how historians write history. They realize that textbooks do not fall out of the sky; they are created by people with biases and feelings. Finally, students can become more tolerant of multiple perspectives as read their classmates' history books.

Taken together, these activities provide a loose outline for a history course. They could be rearranged, supplemented, or used "a la carte"; educators and students will certainly have their own ideas about how history can be taught to support multi-ethnic civil society. This section was intended as a starting point rather than a finished project; the next step would be for educators to test and refine these strategies in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the issues that surround developing history curricula to support multi-ethnic civil society among Burmese people in a variety of contexts: in Burmese refugee camps in Thailand, in cease-fire areas and ethnic nationality areas inside Burma, and in exile in Thailand. I gave an overview of the context and purpose of this endeavor, outlined and analyzed the information I gained from interviews with

educators, and proposed methodologies of teaching the history of Burma that could support multi-ethnic civil society.

The greatest obstacles to implementation of these methodologies are the poverty and insecurity created by Burma's ongoing civil war. Low educational opportunity and scarce resources leave little opportunity for these methodologies to support progress toward multi-ethnic civil society. Burmese teachers working in rudimentary classrooms of fifty to a hundred students, facing hunger and violence every day, may not be able to make much use of these strategies. It may therefore seem impractical, in the face of the multiple crises that Burma faces, to focus on developing curricula and training teachers. On the other hand, the social forces that these methodologies for teaching history seek to activate could contribute, in some small way, to a transformation of the conflict in Burma; curriculum reform should be pursued energetically despite political deadlock. Looking to the future, a newly-constituted democratic union of Burma would require a revised history curriculum, and ethnic nationality areas—especially the relatively stable refugee camps— could serve as a useful test-case.

Another obstacle to implementation of these teaching methodologies is the lack of motivation on the part of educators. While those I interviewed were, for the most part, eager to revise their curricula in some way, they do not necessarily represent the majority. It is easier to keep the traditional way of teaching and avoid the cultural challenges involved in bringing up sensitive historical issues. Some may even argue that discussing history could arouse passions that make the conflict worse. However, it should be clear that disagreements over history already fuel the conflict in Burma. It is unlikely that any new curricula would politicize history more profoundly than those that are currently in use.

Despite these obstacles, the re-design of history curricula is crucial. Learning history is vital for young people who are forming their identities. Especially for refugees or displaced persons, preserving culture and history are important to the psychological wellbeing of the community. Creating an historical record of violence and injustice can also be crucial in healing its wounds. The long-term success of any national reconciliation process in Burma rests upon a process of historical reconciliation, in which people face the tragedies of their shared history and the prospects of their shared future; who better to begin this endeavor than school children?

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