

# Taking the sage off the stage: Identifying obstacles to student-centred instruction on the Thai-Myanmar border

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*After the 1962 coup d'état, Myanmar's education system plunged into a downward spiral of insolvency and isolation from internationally recognized education standards. In the years that followed, alternative education providers, including ethnic education service providers in Myanmar, and the refugee and migrant education systems in neighbouring Thailand, emerged to provide emergency education. Now Myanmar is in a time of great educational transition and reform, with a new teacher training curriculum and competency framework being developed. Insight into the instructional practices implemented is necessary to ensure effective reform that represents all educational stakeholders. Participants (n = 19) from Myanmar who were studying Education as a major at a Thai university responded to a mixed methods survey which asked them to explain common instructional practices in their high school education. The study identified that the pressure on teachers to adhere to the recall-intensive nature of the national university entrance test and teacher-student authoritative power-distance were the main barriers to practicing student-centered instructional methods. This study recommends a reconciliation of traditional direct instructional methods with an increased focus on interactive whole-class teaching.*

*Keywords: migrant education; refugee education; Myanmar education; student-centered instruction; Thai-Myanmar border; Southeast Asian*

## INTRODUCTION

In the years following the 1962 *coup d'état*, Myanmar's<sup>1</sup> schools became nationalized and Burmese replaced English as the language of instruction at universities throughout the country (Thein, 2004). This controversial change was unpopular and highly contested by many of Myanmar's ethnic minorities. Annual government spending on education decreased to 0.8% of the country's GDP, leaving Myanmar 172<sup>nd</sup> out of the 173 countries surveyed in the Central Intelligence Agency's educational expenditure rankings (CIA, 2011). In areas under the control of non-state actors (NSAs) the national education system was subsequently rejected, substituted or supplemented by independent education systems established by ethnic education departments who viewed the centralized system as unrepresentative. Amidst decades of conflict and geographical fragmentation, these

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the name, Myanmar, to denote the country. It should be noted that many people, including local political reformists, continue to use the name 'Burma' to demonstrate opposition to the current government, its policies and practices.

marginalized social systems continue to provide education which is largely unrecognized by the state (Jolliffe, 2015). Currently, in areas under government control, the Ministry of Education (MOE) is the main supplier of educational services. In areas controlled by NSAs or areas of mixed administration, educational services are provided and given a mixture of state and non-state oversight (Zobrist & McCormick, 2013). Prominent NSAs in Southeastern Myanmar include the Karenni Education Department (KnED), the Karen Education Department (KED), and the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC). In recent years, bridges between ethnic and the national education system have been built that allow students of some ethnic education systems to sit the Myanmar national university entrance exam.

Because of much instability and unrest in Myanmar over the past half-century, many citizens fled to refugee camps in neighbouring Thailand. There are currently nine authorized refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border<sup>2</sup> with an estimated 30,000 students attending primary or secondary school, and over 1,500 teachers in more than 80 schools (Proctor, Sane, & Taffesse, 2009). This diverse population, classified as either forced migrants or refugees, consists mostly of the Karen, Kachin, Pa-O, Burman, Mon, Shan and Karenni ethnic groups, but there are others as well. Since 1994, the Royal Thai Government has officially allowed the educational support (encompassing school administration, curriculum support and teacher training) provided by the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRC-EE) and the Karenni Education Department (KnED) (Sawade, 2007). Migrant communities have established locally operated schools commonly referred to as “Learning Centers (LCs)” or “Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs)”<sup>3</sup> across Thailand in response to the barriers to accessing the education system operated by the Royal Thai Government (RTG). These marginalized children have been excluded based on nationality, ethnicity, language, culture and economic status (Proctor, Sane, & Taffesse, 2009). Many community-based organizations (CBOs) with corresponding schools have been established over the past 20 years to serve the growing ethnic populations that have been displaced by Myanmar’s civil war. The first MLC on the Thai/Myanmar border was established in 1991 with an enrolment of 56 students. This number steadily increased until the 2000s when enrolment dramatically increased. In 2010 there were 11,008 students enrolled amongst 61 unique MLCs (MECC, 2010). As this model of migrant institution-building expanded, the Thai Ministry of Education has become increasingly engaged in migrant education (Lee, 2014). This partnership, although challenging at times due to the number of participants and the non-standardized nature of MLCs, has acted as a platform for all stakeholders in migrant education to interact. Each migrant learning centre has a distinct set of core values, curriculum, metrics for success and, ultimately, vision.

Without one centralized governing body, many schools remain isolated. To address this problem, CBOs, such as the Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (BMWEC) and the Burmese Migrant Teacher’s Association (BMTA), work in partnership with Non-

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<sup>2</sup> During the course of this paper, the term, border, will be used to refer to the areas occupied by ethnic military groups and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Myanmar, as well as refugee camps and migrant communities in Thailand.

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the term, migrant learning centres (MLCs), is used to refer to community-established education centres for grades K-12 that operate using a mixed curriculum that includes elements of the Thai and Myanmar course of study. These schools are independently funded and have diverse educational goals and outcomes.

Government Organizations (NGOs), such as World Education Thailand, to unify MLCs and strengthen educational quality, access and recognition. Faced with high student attrition, minimal resources and no governing body to recognize their training and experience, migrant teachers face monumental challenges not experienced by teachers in developed nations. As the political situation improves, stakeholders in the refugee, ethnic and migrant education systems are working increasingly working more closely with the Myanmar MOE to provide pathways of recognized education for both teachers and students.

Despite major criticism from multiple student groups represented by the Action Committee for Democratic Education (ACDE), on 30 September 2014, the *National Education Law* – a legally binding document designed to modernize Myanmar’s education system – was approved in Myanmar. In response, the ACDE published an outline of 11 issues to be discussed at the quadripartite meeting involving the ACDE, National Network for Education Reform (NNER), MOE and the Parliament. Among these issues, the student groups called for the allocation of 20% of the national budget to education, a reform of instructional methods to ensure freedom of thought, and the extension of free compulsory education to the middle school level (Burma Partnership, 2015). Constructive dialogue between student groups and the government represents a ground-breaking shift in education reform – one that could lead to increased opportunities for the educators in the three settings this paper focuses on. Stakeholders from ethnic, refugee and migrant education systems are working to engage with national education policymakers to ensure their perspectives and the contexts in which they teach are taken into account. The Myanmar MOE established the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) in February 2012 to develop recommendations for the reform of the education system in order to bring Myanmar’s education system up to both the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and international standards. Through three phases of reporting, the CESR analysed the current educational environment in Myanmar. It was found that memorization-based instructional methods were pervasive throughout the entire educational system. Specifically, the CESR Phase 2 report found that pre-service teacher trainers in Myanmar relied heavily on learning by rote and had difficulty with problem solving and conditional thinking (MOE, 2014). Additionally, teachers at educational colleges and universities struggled to use learner-centred instructional approaches. In a study across 21 education centres in Myanmar, the British Council (2015) found that both teacher educators and teachers exhibited limited diversity in their instructional methods due to the rigid curriculum and assessments in the current system. Teacher educators and teachers also cited a lack of resources and large class sizes as reasons that they didn’t employ more interactive instructional methods (British Council, 2015). The CESR Phase 2 report on secondary education also identified pressure from parents, students and colleagues to teach in more traditional ways as reasons that new teachers fail to employ new pedagogical methods (MOE, 2014). The CESR, while informative, only focused on Myanmar’s national schools. Further research into the instructional practices occurring in migrant, refugee and ethnic education systems is required to fully represent Myanmar’s diverse ethnic populations.

A child’s success in school is shaped by many factors, but the largest influence on students’ learning outcomes is the quality and expertise of the teacher (Hattie, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2014). All high performing education systems invest in their teachers because they play a critical role in improving student performance (OECD, 2011). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) performed a

comprehensive review of teacher education in 65 countries from around the world and concluded that, in all high-performing education systems, not only are teachers the most influential component in improving education outcomes, teachers were often involved in the improvement process. Therefore, in order to focus on the factors that have the largest impact on educational outcomes, this descriptive study will examine the common practices of teachers and the conditions in which they work. This study will analyse the experiences and perspectives of classroom practice from successful high school students who studied in refugee camps located on the Thai-Myanmar border, migrant learning centres in Thailand or in government and ethnic schools in Myanmar. Although these settings each have their own set of challenges, they share the goal of providing non-traditional education to ethnic minorities in the context of development. Extensive research and support is currently focused on teachers in Myanmar's national schools. This paper aims to add the perspectives of non-state education systems in order to paint a more holistic picture of classroom practices in this development context.

## **BACKGROUND LITERATURE**

The Myanmar MOE has committed to achieving a transformational shift in the education system by 2021, including a goal that “teachers support, develop, and apply interactive classroom teaching and learning benefiting all students” (Department of Teacher Education and Training, 2015). This literature review will first consider both sides of the teacher- vs. student-centred instruction debate in order to broadly understand the advantages and constraints of each approach. Until now, recommendations on which approach is most appropriate remain divided in the context of development. This will be followed by a review of specific obstacles to student-centred instruction in development contexts. Lastly, an analysis of traditional classroom practices of teachers from Myanmar will be presented in order to give an overview of the culture and context that influences education in migrant, ethnic and refugee camp-based schools. This review aims to highlight the diverse approaches needed for effective and sustainable educational reform.

### **The debate: Student-centred vs teacher-centred**

There are many interpretations of what classroom practices should be classified as student-centred,<sup>4</sup> as discussed by Westbrook et al. (2013) when contrasting the practiced understanding of “child-centred learning” versus “active learning.” Learner-centred education allows and therefore requires students to manage how and what they learn. Learning becomes inherently shaped by pupil's interests and capabilities, for better or worse. Learner-centred education has been endorsed by many international education organizations, such as the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), and represents one of INEE's minimum standards for education in emergencies (INEE, 2004). Minimal instruction from the teacher is a central component of many definitions; however this is a shared theme when also comparing student-centred approaches to the terms “problem-based learning”, “discovery learning” or “experiential learning” (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). Learner-centred education has been described by

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<sup>4</sup> In line with current literature surrounding pedagogical practice and development, this paper will use the terms “child-centred”, “student-centred”, and “learner-centred”, interchangeably because the distinction lies in the educational context and age of the learners with little differentiation in terms of classroom practice.

Ozga and Jones (2006) as a “traveling policy” – widely validated by international NGOs who are working in education and by national governments alike.

The teacher being the dominant figure and source of new information in the classroom represents the defining distinction between teacher-centred and learner-centred instructional methods in much of the literature. Teacher-centred instruction is often branded as an authoritarian and hierarchical model in which learning is achieved through repetition, memorization and the transition of knowledge, quantified through testing and recitation (Barrett, 2007). To this Hattie (2009) clarifies that direct instruction is not to be confused with “didactic, teacher-led, talking from the front” teaching. Instead, he notes that direct instruction refers to who has power to direct learning outcomes and communicate standards in the classroom. In fact, there is significant evidence that direct instructional or teacher-centred methods improve student achievement. Hattie found an effect size of 0.59 associated with direct instruction – providing evidence that, when executed correctly, it is effective at achieving strong learning outcomes. Because of the widespread misinterpretation that direct instruction or teacher-centred education is merely rote learning without understanding, literature regarding educational reform in the developing world is quite polarized when comparing learner-centred approaches and teacher-centred approaches. Frequently, the concept of “critical thinking” is inappropriately used to differentiate between the methodologies. Critical thinking, as defined by Michael Scriven and Richard Paul during a presentation at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference on Critical Thinking and Education Reform in 1987, is an active process that involves applying, synthesizing and evaluating information gathered through multimodal observations, resources and interactions:

[Critical thinking] is thus to be contrasted with: 1) the mere acquisition and retention of information alone, because it involves a particular way in which information is sought and treated; 2) the mere possession of skills, because it involves the continual use of them; and 3) the mere use of those skills (“as an exercise”) without acceptance of their results (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2015).

Thus, it is essential to recognize that critical thinking can be fostered with both teacher- and student-centred approaches, so long as the teacher promotes the continual elevation and application of skills acquired in class. A review of the literature reveals that teachers who actively engage the whole class through direct instruction achieve improved results on standardized tests (Galton & Croll, 1980; Muijs & Reynolds, 2002; Rosenshine, 1979). A student-centred model allows students to access knowledge independently, thus bringing the teacher’s knowledge into question. It has been found that student-centred, team-based learning can foster stronger information retention, skill development and accountability for learning among students (Simonson, 2014). Schweisfurth (2013) states that learner-centred education “gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the contents and processes of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners’ needs, capacities and interests” (p. 20). To create lasting change, the degree of comfort teachers feel about relinquishing control needs to be addressed.

Westbrooke et al. (2013) conducted a systematic review of 489 published international studies (including an in-depth analysis of 54 empirical studies) based in low and middle income countries in order to determine the constituents of effective pedagogical models in these difficult contexts. The main finding was that interactive classroom pedagogy was

the most effective instructional method. Specifically, three teaching strategies surfaced that promote strong interactive classroom pedagogy:

1. Providing individualized feedback and instructions,
2. Fostering a safe and inclusive classroom environment, and
3. Contextualizing teaching to incorporate students' backgrounds, abilities, interests and culture.

These strategies are not exclusive to student-centred or teacher-centred instructional methods, rather they represent many of the characteristics of “active teaching” or “whole class interactive teaching” (Muijs & Reynolds, 2011; Petty, 2014). This represents an instructional method that brings the content of the lesson to the whole class, engaging learners individually and encouraging participation (Muijs & Reynolds, 2011). In his seminal work, *Visible Learning*, John Hattie (2009) reviewed over 50,000 studies though 500 meta-analyses covering more than 80 million learners in order to determine the best educational practices that influence student achievement. This review found that interactive classroom teaching, whether teacher- or student-centred, was most likely to heighten understanding and student learning (Hattie, 2009).

### **Obstacles to implementing student-centered instruction in development contexts**

There are many environmental and culturally-imposed barriers that hinder pedagogical reform in developing countries. The failure to sustainably implement foreign (and often decontextualized) pedagogical policies in middle and low income countries has been described as “tissue rejection” in the development literature (Harley et al., 2000). Because many child-centred approaches require extensive resources and training, implementing learner-centred approaches in the context of development poses many challenges to policymakers (Lall, 2011). Sriprakash (2010) actually found that employing child-centred approaches resulted in negative outcomes, including increased student attrition and decreased student achievement in rural Indian primary schools. Teacher training is often an integral part of educational strengthening implemented by NGOs in developing countries. This focus can be attributed to the large body of research revealing that an untrained teacher often has a negative impact on student learning. There is a significant relationship between the quality of the teacher and student learning (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2003). However, training teachers is often not enough for sustainable improvement. If the training is not in alignment with existing educational policies, then educators will experience a form of cognitive dissonance, resulting in a reversion to previous instructional approaches. Schweisfurth (2013, p. 4) refers to this disconnect as a “classic and recurrent policy contradiction.”

Schweisfurth (2011) conducted a review of 72 studies of attempts to implement student-centred methodologies in the context of development. The conclusion was overwhelmingly that the execution of learner-centred teaching practices was fraught with failure because of the following four categorical oversights:

1. Unrealistic expectations in terms of speed and ease of implementation. Many cases were cited which demonstrated disregard for wider systemic implications.
2. Resource constraints that include large student/teacher ratios, limited teaching resources, teacher capacity and motivation, and poor school infrastructure.
3. Disregard for local culture, in particular, teachers not being able to effectively shift from the group interests of the class to the specific needs of individual

learners in collectivist cultures.

4. Lack of cohesion with larger framework and curriculum. Many studies concluded that due to the pressure of impending high-stakes exams, teachers were unable to adopt new teaching methods; the curriculum also needs to be reformed as part of the process.

Schweisfurth (2011) concludes: “the history of the implementation of learner-centered education is riddled with stories of failure grand and small” (p. 425). Implementing student-centred approaches in the context of development, therefore, requires improved teacher/student ratios, extensive training, adequate teaching resources, and a reform of high-stakes exams in order to be sustainable.

### **Obstacles to implementing student-centred instruction in Myanmar**

In the frequently shifting political, social and economic climate on both sides of the Thai-Myanmar border, educators face a unique set of challenges very different from those faced by teachers working within a recognized and established system. High school teachers working in the migrant schools face hardships because of limited resources, financial instability, inconsistent training, lack of centralized oversight, limited documentation and negligible accountability to established standards (Dowding, 2014). When Dare (2014) collected data on professional profiles of the teachers in the refugee camps, she found that only 50% of the teachers had completed high school, with the majority doing so in the camps. The demands placed on camp-based teachers are compounded by large class sizes, a high teacher turnover rate, restrictive classroom resources and limited access to electricity. Metro (2006) notes: “the fact that the vast majority of young people have the opportunity to learn is significant” (p. 1). However, the opportunity to merely learn is not enough. Quality and recognized education that is accessible to all learners needs to be promoted in these low resource contexts.

Cited instructional methods common to Southeast Asian classrooms, such as Myanmar, include: general acceptance of the rote model, teacher-centred instruction, high student-teacher power-distance, adherence to a strict curriculum, and knowledge-focused evaluation (Lwin, 2007; Park & Nuntrakune, 2013; Thanh, 2011). Exposure to these passive methodologies inhibits critical thinking and obstructs the students from taking ownership for their learning. This creates an atmosphere where individual and creative thought are suppressed and compliance to a valued norm is fostered (Kantar, 2013). Many Asian cultures, including that of Myanmar, praise conformity to a valued norm, which makes implementing student-centred approaches difficult (Richmond, 2007). Within this setting, it is commonly viewed as disrespectful to the teacher to state an idea or opinion not in line with the teacher’s view. On this topic, Thanh (2011) reasons that there is opposition to student-centred teaching methods because they “put teachers on a par with their students and detract from teacher authority” (p. 522).

High power-distance stresses a hierarchical relationship between student and teacher and reinforces teachers’ adherence to authoritarian instructional methods (Hofstede, 2003). As Gilhooley (2015) outlines, the Myanmar word *annade*, which refers to a powerful cultural concept that can be described as “I feel bad that you have to go out of the way to do something for me”, is commonly used to describe a student’s feelings in relation to a teacher or elder. Behaviours such as obedience and conformity are promoted and reinforced in educational settings. Rather than asking a difficult question, which could be

interpreted as challenging an authority figure, students often remain silent and submissive. Implementing new teaching methods would undermine the teacher-as-knowledge-giver framework and cause them to lose face if tested or challenged by a student. This reverence for esteemed elders combined with the high value placed on education creates a large professional distance between students and teachers (Baron et al., 2007; Thawnghmung, 2012). Students view the teacher as the ultimate source of knowledge and become passive observers rather than evaluating or generating their own knowledge. This impediment is compounded when teachers lack sufficient training, which results in students receiving incorrect or incomplete information from a source they deem infallible. In a resource-poor setting, such as Myanmar, a student of a weak or unskilled teacher has few other avenues to acquire new information. Students believe that they cannot themselves find truth but must source it from its owners: the teachers (Kennedy, 2002). A student's role becomes mastering (often memorizing) the content without challenging its validity or relevance (Thanh, 2011).

In September 2015, the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID) in conjunction with the British Council launched the English for Education College Trainers (EfECT) project in Myanmar designed to improve Myanmar state school teachers' English and teaching skills. Forty-eight International trainers with backgrounds in English language teaching were brought to Myanmar to work with 1,600 teacher educators over a two-year period. A comprehensive needs analysis undertaken by the EfECT trainers before the training found that 84% of the Myanmar teacher educators stated they were familiar with child-centred approaches. The teacher educators cited that implementing child-centred approaches often failed because of large class sizes, time constraints, national test pressure, lack of motivation, insufficient training, classroom layout and furniture, and, interestingly, a fear of being perceived as lazy by their colleagues (British Council, 2015). The EfECT trainers observed these same teacher educators and found that much of their class was comprised of drilling, choral responses, chanting, reading aloud and rote memorization. The teacher educators exhibited a dependence on traditional methods and lacked confidence in using diverse instructional practices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study described in this paper is based on a survey of undergraduate students from Myanmar studying education at an international university in Thailand. The web-based survey was designed to stimulate participants to reflect on the teaching practices they experienced as high school students in either the refugee camps located on the Thai-Myanmar border, MLCs in Thailand, or government and ethnic schools in Myanmar. A mixed-methods questionnaire, drawing from the author's experience and a literature review of educational research, was employed to confirm previous findings about instructional practices common to the local development context and to identify new information on this topic. Student perceptions about classroom context and educational methods are critically important to those who determine curriculum, practice and pedagogy (Harris et al., 2014). By gaining further insight into the high school experiences of these Myanmar youth from conflict-affected areas, who now have a strong understanding of modern and diverse pedagogical methods from their undergraduate study, one can begin to break down and identify obstacles to implementing student-centred, holistic and engaging teaching methods within this diverse context.



### **Author's positionality**

The research for this paper was inspired by teaching at an educational bridging program for migrant and refugee students from Myanmar at a donor-funded boarding school located on the Thai-Myanmar border for three years from 2011-2014. The school enrolls academically gifted and ethnically diverse students from all over Myanmar. Previous to studying at this program, students completed their high school education in one of three places: a government or ethnic high school in Myanmar, a MLC in Thailand, or a high school located in one of nine refugee camps located along the Thai-Myanmar border. The author taught using both student-centred and interactive approaches and observed that, at first, students were hesitant to engage in class activities or ask clarification questions. Students initially believed that asking questions was disrespectful to the teacher, perceiving that their questioning implied the teacher had not taught satisfactorily. The author desired to promote critical thinking and creative thought in the classroom in a way that respected students' culture and prior learning. This research aims to delve into the underlying issues surrounding implementing student-centred instruction, building on the author's experience working to educate displaced students from Myanmar within a development context.

### **Sample and data collection**

In order to gain insight into current educational practices for ethnic minorities occurring in high schools located in Myanmar, the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border and migrant high schools in Thailand, a purposive sample (Deming, 1990) consisting of undergraduate students studying education who have successfully completed their high school in these locations was selected. Students who are studying education as a major were surveyed specifically because they have been exposed to different instructional styles and have a comprehensive understanding of different pedagogical methods, including learner-centred instruction. This sample also possesses a thorough understanding of the local setting, culture, context and traditions. Child's Dream, a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering marginalized children and youth in the Mekong Sub-Region, was contacted by the author because they provide university scholarships to many young adults from Myanmar. After consultation with the management team at Child's Dream, it was agreed that an anonymous, voluntary survey could be shared with Myanmar students on scholarship currently enrolled as undergraduate education majors. The 19 participants (n=19), aged 19 to 27, have overcome many obstacles during their unique educational pathways. These students possess the critical and credible insight necessary for effective and realistic educational reform in the context of development. In order to collect data, a survey that included six quantitative and four qualitative questions were shared with the sample group via the Child's Dream scholarship recipient webpage. The sample had the opportunity to anonymously respond to survey questions over the course of three weeks.

### **Data analysis**

The qualitative data was analysed thematically to categorize and study trends. Open coding was employed to identify thematic patterns using key words and phrases in the text. Responses falling under different themes were grouped together for analysis. Participants gave specific insight based on the setting of their high school. These settings were grouped into three main categories (refugee, migrant and ethnic/government high

school) before being analysed. Responses centred on four main themes: the perceived contrast between Myanmar and Thailand-based schools, the teacher-centred foundation of instruction, cultural influences on teacher authority, and resource and training constraints. From this analysis, two major obstacles to implementing student-centred instruction emerged: the pressure on teachers to adhere to the recall-intensive nature of the national university entrance test and teacher-student authoritative power-distance. Quantitative responses were analysed using median and range.

## **FINDINGS**

Analysis of the survey responses confirmed most of the previously cited obstacles to student-centred instruction. Additional themes and perspectives arose that shed light on nuanced cultural norms, various educational stakeholders' involvement, and barriers to sustainable reform. These perspectives have been categorized by theme and are presented below. Note that although the respondents were anonymous each has been assigned a corresponding ID code represented as (R1) through (R19) in the discussion below.

The sample population had diverse educational backgrounds with 10 respondents having attended high school in Myanmar, five in one of the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border and four at a migrant learning centre in Thailand. The findings reveal that there is a stark contrast between the perceptions of education in Myanmar versus Thailand; respondents that have experienced both believe that Myanmar schools are comparatively far worse off. This was especially highlighted when the sample was asked to share insights into the conditions of their high school classrooms. Besides structural impediments, such as lack of textbooks, rare access to computers, inadequate desks, and low classroom resources, the unquestioning adherence to traditional customs was perceived by the participants on both sides of the border as hindering reform efforts. Nearly all respondents stated that reform was necessary, although few could give concrete suggestions to combat culturally-accepted educational norms. It was previously assumed that teachers had not been exposed to student-centred or interactive instructional methods and, therefore, could not employ them in their classrooms; however, respondents believed that teachers had been, in fact, received training in these areas but, because there was little practical application or follow-up, many educators reverted back to the traditional methods they were more comfortable using.

### **Perceived contrast between Myanmar and Thailand-based schools**

Many of the respondents had strong opinions concerning the quality of education they received while attending high school in Myanmar versus a high school in a refugee camp or a MLC in Thailand. As many of the respondents had previously studied in Myanmar before coming to Thailand, comments concerning the contrasts between the systems arose. Overall, the majority of respondents that attended high school in Myanmar had a strikingly negative view of their experience and the wider educational system. For example, one respondent stated that Myanmar's education system "is totally destroyed by military dictatorship but you must have certificate to survive in this country although it is not worthy anymore" (R3). One feature that was unique to the educational experience of students who attended high school in Myanmar was the reality of bribery occurring within the schools. Two central motives for bribery surfaced. The first is that high school in Myanmar culminates with a high stakes national standardized test that some teachers are more equipped to prepare students for than others. Schools often segregate students

into classes based on academic performance and, it was cited, some parents give money to school administrators and teachers to get their child into the preferred class with the best teachers: “education is depend[ent] on amount of money you have” (R2). The second reason for bribery that arose was to avoid punishment or discrimination from the teacher:

Some of the teachers favor to some students who give presents or bribe. Some of the students who do not give favor to them. As a result, the students are dare not to ask question if they do not understand because they are afraid that the teacher will beat them. That is what they do it in the class. These situation is only for Burma high school situation (R8).

Interestingly, this same respondent suggested that, in some cases, teachers accepting bribes might be the result of the larger, systemic problem of teachers not receiving a living wage through their profession. This circumstance results in teachers accepting bribes out of necessity as they “need to take it” (R8). One cited distinction between Thailand-based high schools and Myanmar-based high schools was the level of support they received from outside sources, such as NGOs. Overall, there was a stronger positive perception of the educational experiences of students who attended high school in a refugee camp-based school or a MLC; however, many respondents made reference to areas of improvement even within well-funded schools. One respondent, (R9), began by stating: “Mostly, classrooms in migrant school are not so convenience for the children to study, but only few school can afford to build a good classroom depending on their connection with individual donors or NGOs”, then continued to describe one migrant high school that had abundant infrastructure including:

Very good and quiet fine environment . . . individual desk for each students, separated room (not hall), and enough classroom materials such as whiteboard, stationary, as well as electricity, fans. They even have a computer lab for student (R9).

R9 was describing an exceptional outlier among migrant learning centres and concluded: “This kind of school is so rare in the migrant school areas.” Another cited distinction between Myanmar and Thailand-based high schools was that there were more interactive teaching methods being employed among Thailand-based schools. For example: “When I was in Migrant school, I was really enjoying studying. I love new teaching method such as playing games during studying which I have never seen in Myanmar” (R16). This merit, however, was not shared by all respondents. Many of the traditional, teacher-centred pedagogies common to instructional practice in Myanmar were also observed as being perpetuated in migrant schools: “In Migrant high school . . . the lessons are mostly lecture. When I studied science, there was no experiment . . . no group work” (R19).

### **Teacher-centred foundation of instruction**

Regardless of location, it was evident that teacher-centred instruction dominated as the most frequently cited instructional practice. Respondents were asked to reflect on how often different pedagogical methods were employed during their high school education using a Likert scale with corresponding responses: (1) never, (2) once a month, (3) once a week, (4) multiple times a week, and (5) everyday. There was a significant contrast between the reported frequency of teacher-centred versus student-centred instructional methods (see reported frequencies in Table 1). The most common response for how often teacher-centred instruction occurred was “everyday”, whereas the most common response for the frequency of student-centred was “once a month.”

**Table 1: Frequency of teacher vs student-centred pedagogical methods during high school**

	Median	Range
Teacher-centred – Direct instruction	5	2-5
Student-centred – Inquiry based learning	2	1-5
Student-centred – Cooperative learning	2	1-5

When respondents were asked to rank nine skills that were absent from their high school education but they, now that they are attending university, perceive as necessary, a similar trend emerged when comparing what the respondents chose as their first choice to the overall weighted averages. “Critical thinking” was selected as the most necessary by 37% of the respondents followed by “how to question and debate”, “questioning skills”, “critical reading” and “forming opinions.” This same sequence also emerged when comparing the weighted averages of all scores. Respondents were also asked to reflect on the frequency of different pedagogical methods that occurred during their high school education (see Table 2 for the list of methods). The most frequent method was “lecture”, followed by “memorization-based activities” and “individual classwork.” All three of these methods require the students to remain passive and work independently. Similar to the reported frequency of assessment, memorization is a routine feature of classroom practice. Memorization-based activities could include choral responses, asking students lower-order thinking questions, and copying vast amounts of text.

**Table 2: Frequency of activities during high school**

	Median	Range
Lecture	5	1 – 5
Memorization-based activities	4	2 – 5
Individual classwork	4	1 – 4
Class discussion	2	1 – 4
Group work/projects	2	1 – 3
Practicals/labs	2	1 – 4
Debates	1	1 – 3
Student presentations	1	1 – 4

The strong influence of a hierarchical culture cited in the literature review was confirmed throughout the survey within a variety of contexts and among various relationships. Three main contexts were found where hierarchy played a prominent role: 1. between teachers and students; 2. between parents and students; and 3. between school management and teachers. The teacher, perceived by students as possessing similar or greater authority than even their own parents, was viewed by many respondents as infallible within the cultural context to the degree that:

Students are feeling uncomfortable to ask teachers if he or she is not clear about lessons. Most of the times students are thinking they might interrupt the teaching. So students often stay silent in class (R11).

When asked to identify the major obstacles to improving the quality of high school education, 72% of the sample selected: “Students are not comfortable questioning the teacher.” Respect for the teacher was also embodied as fear, with students expected to

remain passive: “Mostly, students have to be afraid of teacher and remain silent the whole lecture time while teacher is talking. There is no fun at all.” Whether out of respect or fear, students believed their role in the classroom was to be passive. This resulted in: “The classroom of high school atmosphere is quiet because the teachers do not like asking question. There is only one thing to do that is listening what the teachers say” (R8). The respondents were, however, quite aware that, even though it was culturally expected to show respect to the teacher, teachers are not without limitations: “Most teacher doesn’t have much of knowledge on the subject they are teaching” (R19).

### **Resource and training constraints**

When asked to identify the major obstacles to improving the quality of high school education “Low resources in the classroom” was selected by 83% of the respondents. Two structural needs were acknowledged: classroom materials and school infrastructure. Examples of deficient classroom materials included notebooks, textbooks, stationary, teaching aids, posters and maps. Classroom materials were mostly reported to be absent. When materials, such as textbooks, were available, they were described as being shared amongst up to three students for one book. School infrastructure, such as desks, tables, blackboards, bathroom facilities, playground and internet access, were all stated to be in a state of disrepair. The classroom environments were described as “small”, “dark”, “dusty” (R13), “so close to each other” (R5), “crowded”, “noisy” (R4), “over 30 students” (R7), “40 students in one classroom” (R17), and “over 60 students” (R3).

The need for individualized teacher training with corresponding follow-up was a major theme that was identified when respondents were asked what support local teachers needed to help them adopt new teaching methods. Topics suggested for teacher training included “group discussion” (R19), “active teaching methods” (R16), “critical thinking skills” (R12), “creative teaching” (R10), “student-centred based learning” (R9), “child psychology” (R5), and “classroom management” (R1). Opinions were varied when describing the main reason why new pedagogical methods were lacking in high school classrooms. Two explanations surfaced through the survey: either teacher training was not available, or training was available but consisted mainly of theory without application to classroom practice. For this reason, three respondents suggested that teachers required exposure to other schools outside their own to observe different teaching methods in practice.

## **DISCUSSION**

In order to implement sustainable educational reform, two major factors that underpin the current educational model need to be addressed. The first is the rote memorization-based university entrance test. Assessment drives instructional practice and if the two are not aligned no change will occur. The educational system needs to reform holistically for lasting improvement. The second factor is the cultural hierarchy that was cited to be prevalent in all three of the studied high school contexts: the migrant, the refugee and the ethnic education systems. If reform does not consider the wider culture that permeates the classroom, little instructional practice will actually change.

### Assessment anchor

When asked to identify the major obstacles to improving the quality of high school education, “Memorization is necessary to prepare students for standardized tests” was the most frequently chosen answer, selected by 89% of respondents. The Myanmar University Entrance Examination, also commonly referred to as the “matriculation test” is the capstone to a Myanmar student’s education. The results of this exam determine students’ eligibility to pursue higher education in Myanmar. The annual pass rate has been historically low with a pass rate of 30.67% in 2014 and 37.6% in 2015 (Eleven Myanmar, 2015). This evaluation is heavily memorization-based and requires students to recite vast amounts of text committed to memory. This test acts as an assessment anchor, reinforcing the traditional practice of rote memorization for which “students learn to memorize the answers in the exam without understanding” to the point that pedagogical reform would require implementers “to change the mind of both teachers and students that stick in traditional ways” (R5). This assessment guides not only instructional practice but also how students are assessed by teachers. One respondent cited that memorization was used in many subjects, stating “students will mostly have homework either to memorize and find the answers for history, geography, science subjects or solve mathematical problems” (R7). “Tests” were selected as a central method of evaluation used during high school by 95% of the respondents, followed by “homework completion” (84%) and “individual assignments” (37%). Evaluative methods requiring interaction or working with other students were scarcely selected: “participation” (16%), “presentations” (11%), “labs or practicals” (11%) and “group assignments” (5%). Being able to rehearse and recount information was valued to the degree that many respondents perceived it as the end goal rather than individual thought, for example: “teachers force us to memorize on the lesson instead of knowing the lesson critically” (R9).

For instructional methods that centre on the promotion of critical thinking and individual thought to be successful, the students need to be evaluated on these competencies and be convinced of their relevance and necessity. Part of this memorization fixation can be attributed to the fact that the matriculation exam, the national high school qualification test in Myanmar, is composed of questions mostly evaluating a student’s ability to recite vast amounts of text. With a national high-stakes test as the major quantifier of high school academic achievement, pedagogical reforms will struggle to take root unless all stakeholders can see clear alignment between the new practices and the evaluation. This phenomenon could be thought of as the “assessment anchor” which grounds pedagogical practice in an education system. Even though a new course (pedagogy) is set, without raising the anchor (high-stakes test) the ship remains in the same place. In order for new, interactive teaching methods to be adopted, evaluative methods need to be based on the skills and competencies achieved through learning. For instance, a test where students need to show process work for which there is no sole “right answer” would promote diversity of thought similar to the model proposed by Bassett (2016) in which students are required to select a multiple-choice response and then write a justification for their answer beside their choice.

### Cultural hierarchy

The cultural necessity of hierarchical relationships was also perceived to be present within the management structure of schools. This top-down configuration could, however, be used to implement new teaching methods in a sustainable manner. It was indicated that,

in some cases, teacher trainings focused on new methodologies were offered to teachers but with insufficient follow-up or monitoring. This results in new teaching methods being “left behind in the training classroom in most of the time” (R7). Instead, to instil continuous support, all stakeholders need to be involved in the implementation of new methods:

As most people is used to top down management system, if higher position give a call, every teacher will follow it. It's mean lobbying must be done to all level; teacher and higher officer such as principal, education administrator and government level (R3).

A transition to student-centred instruction requires administration, policy-makers and educators to acknowledge a shift to enabling students and parents to obtain their own knowledge and be able to use it in dialogue with teachers. Myanmar teachers need to be willing to delegate authority to students and relinquish their historic tight control over the learning process. The idea that teachers are infallible and unapproachable needs to be deconstructed to allow the students to voice their opinions in class and develop their own leadership abilities. Many surveyed participants alluded to teachers not having adequate training, professional development or accountability. Together with the hierarchical culture, these factors shed some light on the reasons teachers maintain strict control over the learning process – to avoid losing face in public. If student needs are going to be considered a priority there needs to be a shift that allows them to challenge authority and obtain knowledge for themselves within the current cultural framework.

### **Limitations**

Although this study was able to gather quantitative and qualitative data to holistically illustrate the issues described, more in-depth and rigorous research methods should be employed with a larger sample population in future studies of this multi-ethnic setting. This study could be considered a pilot study used to inform a comprehensive investigation of optimal pedagogical approaches for implementation in this development context. As described in this paper, participants are members of a culture with great respect for teachers and elders. As such, bias based on *annade* cannot be excluded from the study.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of this study have confirmed many of the previously cited obstacles to implementing student-centred instruction in the context of developing countries. Specifically, hurdles to reform in traditional Myanmar culture, such as teacher-student power-distance, rote memorization-based instruction, teacher-centred practices, and a lack of differentiated learning and evaluative methods, were all highlighted. These common classroom practices were found to be embedded in the larger cultural framework, requiring change models to incorporate many educational stakeholders and consider broader implications. In order to introduce pedagogies that enhance critical thinking and student engagement, teachers require support that addresses the low-resource environment, traditional student- teacher relationships, and power structures in Myanmar culture.

Educational policy at the national level needs to acknowledge the necessity to differentiate evaluative methods and empower individual thought among students.

Pedagogy is not merely instructional science but a reflection of the values and beliefs of a culture. To this end, Schweisfurth (2013, p. 5) argues “the only way through the impasse is to think of learner-centered education as a series of continua, rather than seeing it as a single absolute that has only one international configuration.” Consideration of the local culture is paramount when deciding how and what to focus on when reforming pedagogical practice. In all three development contexts reported on in this paper, educators require a holistic policy that empowers them with the necessary tools, materials, training and support required to enable students to succeed at differentiated assessments.

In a study that examined learning reforms in Asia, Thanh (2012) found that Western-developed practices, like student-centred instruction, were not viewed as a better method of knowledge acquisition compared to traditional methods. Both the teachers and students continued to believe that academic success required the replication of content from lectures and textbooks. This belief was largely rooted in the fact that students were evaluated using techniques that focused on the replication of content. A change in pedagogical practice cannot be implemented at only one level. Furthermore, Thanh (2011, p. 521) states, “learning is not an independent variable that can simply be borrowed and implemented in all contexts.” Many factors that affect learning need to be considered including culture, values, teaching methods, assessment focus and workload (Kember & Gow, 1994). In order to have lasting learning outcomes there needs to a marriage of cultural values and pedagogical practice. Furthermore, Hayes (2012) conducted a review of international research in order to identify factors to successfully reform educators’ teaching methods. This review cited three factors critical to effective transition:

1. Alignment of teacher training to exam systems, curricula, and available teaching resources;
2. Supporting teachers with a mechanism to experiment, reflect and share their experiences; and
3. Engaged school leadership that is aware and strongly supports the pedagogical transition.

To summarize, Hayes’s review stressed the significance of a systematic and integrated approach when attempting to fundamentally reform instructional methods. These conclusions lead to the question: what should future teacher training for Myanmar educators focus on in order to enable the deployment of engaging and interactive pedagogy that improves learning outcomes and fosters independent thought? This question should be carefully considered in light of the resource-poor context compounded by large class sizes and little available infrastructure for teacher support. The current derogatory view of “teacher-centred” or “direct instruction” often polarizes the conversation of how to most effectively encourage active learning in the classroom. This leads many teacher training programs in the developing world to focus on student-centred methodologies even though abundant literature exists outlining the various obstacles to implementing student-centred instruction in development contexts (Lall, 2011; Park & Nuntrakune, 2013; Schweisfurth, 2011; Sriprakash, 2010; Thanh, 2012; Westbrook et al., 2013). Supporters of direct instruction would advocate that effective teacher-centred instruction incorporates interactive whole-class teaching, not just teacher talk. This is described as “active teaching” or “structured learning” in the literature and represents more than the pure transmission of information. Direct instruction can still allow students to actively integrate new learning with their current beliefs and knowledge. Direct instruction which encompasses student engagement is in line with constructivist theories



of learning and, therefore, can have similar outcomes as student-centred approaches (Hattie, 2009; Kirschner, Sweller & Clark, 2006; Petty, 2014).

Due to the fact that effectively implementing student-centred instruction would require system-wide reform, extensive resources and training, and tailored strategies to mitigate cultural misunderstanding, one potential solution might be to focus efforts on recognizing and strengthening traditional direct instruction teaching methods. This would involve expanding, building on, and reinforcing the whole-class teaching methods already in use in this context. To this, Westbrook et al. (2013, p. 37) recommend using a combination of teacher-centred and student-centred practices, “integrating newer pedagogies with more traditional ones.” This balanced suggestion takes into account the authoritative role typical of teachers in the context of Southeast Asian classrooms as well as the cultural value placed on teachers. A balanced approach was also endorsed by one of the survey respondents stating, “Teacher-centered is good for sometimes, but sometime, should be student-centered as well. Both have to use together to have effective learning” (R1). This reconciliation of traditional methods would allow for the benefits of learner-centred education to be operationalized in practical ways using methods local teachers already practice. Westbrook et al. (2013) add that this model should also include performance-based competency standards, strong framing of lessons, standardized learning outcomes, and individualized student support. To conclude, the following poem found in Park & Nuntrakune’s 2013 research paper encapsulates the traditional practices present in many classrooms studied in this paper. It reveals the need for all stakeholders to be involved if sustainable educational reform is to occur in a culturally- and contextually-sensitive manner.

*Young people are quiet in the presence of older people;  
Young people seldom disagree with older people;  
Teachers seldom encourage students to express their  
opinions in class;  
Quiet is a virtue;  
Parents discourage children’s verbal communication; and,  
Children are not likely to participate in family discussion.”*

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