Training Burmese Teachers

THEIN LWIN*

Human rights education does not exist in the Burmese formal education system administered by the military regime. However, human rights remain high in the agenda in Burma in light of the democratic movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Burmese people who were forced to flee Burma or migrated elsewhere get the opportunity to learn about human rights through the human rights groups. The Human Rights Education Institute of Burma, for example, tirelessly works on human rights education through training, seminars and publications. The Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers, on the other hand, includes human rights education in its training curriculum. Schools in refugee camps introduce human rights to the students. In this paper I discuss the background of education in Burma, refugee camps and migrant schools, and the educational activities being done by the Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers. I discuss human rights education as a step towards a future democratic Burma.

Education in Burma

The Burmese people received traditional Buddhist education at monasteries in the past. Under the British colonial rule, the school system and curriculums were changed. There were three types of schools – English medium schools, Anglo-vernacular schools and vernacular schools. Vernacular schools were the only schools for the majority of children throughout the country. These schools taught in local language. The other types of schools were only affordable to parents with higher income. The education system under the British administration was called 'colonial education' by the patriotic Burmese. After independence in 1948, it was changed from colonial education to nationalist education which emphasized Burmese nationalism. In 1962, after a military coup, the education system was changed again from nationalist education to so-called socialist education.

Burma has been governed by military regimes from 1962 onward. The nationwide democratic uprising under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 1988 gave people the hope of a return to democracy in Burma and a democratic educational change. However, under the current military regime, education deteriorated in every area from children's access to education, to curriculum, to teaching and students' progress.

Children in rural areas as well as children of poor families in the cities have little chance of getting educated because of lack of schools and economic deprivation. The school dropout rate is very high. According to a recent study (Thein Lwin, 2003)[1], almost forty per cent of the children never attended school and almost three-quarters failed to complete primary education. There is a different reckoning on the adult literacy rate between the regime and other sources. The regime claims that the literacy rate

is 80 per cent[2] while other estimates put it at less than eighty per cent. The regime argues that although the children do not attend public schools, they learn reading and writing at Buddhist monasteries. It is true that the regime allows Buddhist monasteries to open primary schools. Children learn reading, writing and Buddhism. With regard to functional literacy, however, which is required for people to work efficiently with appropriate skills in agricultural, industrial or other sectors, children need at least nine years of compulsory education. Buddhist monasteries do not have the capacity to provide education of this type.

Public Schools

Today's public schools in Burma are extremely poor in terms of equity, quality and efficiency. Schools do not treat students equally. Children of government officials who pay bribes to teachers are privileged. Many teachers enter the classroom without proper training. Curriculum is textbook-based and is just concerned with memorizing facts in science, history, geography and other subjects. Teachers use an authoritative role in teaching. It seems that the regime uses education as a political tool by preventing children from learning how to think. Young people are expected to be disciplined in and out-of-school under the military regime. The notion of discipline invokes ideas of loyalty and gives the image of obedient citizens.

Monastic Education

Thanks to Buddhist monks, children who never enrolled in secular schools can still learn the three Rs in monasteries. These children learn literacy, numeracy, sciences, history and geography as well as Buddhism. From the political, social and religious points of view, however, monastic schools should be reconsidered. Monastic schools are officially allowed by the regime under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. It is likely that monastic schools are supported by Buddhist communities and the regime does not need to use its budget. However, other religious communities - such as Christian and Muslim - are not allowed to open schools. It is not a fair policy. Even in the eyes of Buddhists, schools should be supported by the government and monasteries should be the place for Buddhism. It is difficult for the children of other religious communities to send their children to Buddhist monastic schools.

Private Schools

There are some private schools operating in the city of Rangoon. Since children do not receive quality education in the public schools, parents want to send their children to private schools with Western teachers and qualified local teachers. School fees are high and only the ruling class and rich people can send their children to such schools. There are huge discrepancies between the children of the different social classes with regards to education. The private schools mostly focus on the mastery of the English language. Parents want their children to speak good English - hoping that they will send their children to the English-speaking countries to work or to continue their studies.

Higher Education

The regime has opened many new universities in different regions and proudly announces the number of graduates each year. However, it is just quantity rather than quality. Even so, in terms of quantity, many young people do not finish their primary or secondary education, and only a small percentage of young people can go to the universities. In terms of quality, the universities are very much below standard with lack of resources and research. Students do not get ownership of their learning. University courses are again textbook-based and are seriously lacking in resources.

Students cannot choose the courses they want to study. The subjects to be taken depend

on 11th grade examination marks. Entry to medical, engineering, computer science and foreign relationship courses require higher marks. This makes students, parents and teachers exam-oriented rather than concerned with students' real learning. There is so much corruption involved in order to get higher marks in examinations and entry to popular courses at the university. The quality of education is very low at all levels. Graduates are not properly trained to gain the skills required to be able to work. Many graduates are unemployed. On the other hand, the military established their own universities for the children of members of the military. It is thought that these students are well-trained and have the opportunity to further their studies abroad, while ordinary students receive poor education.

Education of refugees and migrants in Thailand

There are 150,000 refugees living in nine refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border which are recognized by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The refugees are mostly from Karen and Karenni states where frequent fighting between regime troops and ethnic armed groups occur. There are two million illegal immigrants living throughout Thailand outside the camps. The migrant population comes from different parts of Burma and enters Thailand illegally for work. There are also thousands of Burmese migrants living in neighboring Bangladesh and India. Since Thailand is facing a shortage of labor, undocumented immigrants are allowed to apply for work permits to work in farms, factories, and sweatshops. About one million Burmese have applied for work permits, and it is believed that at least another one million are staying in Thailand without proper documents. The annual fee for a work permit is 4,000 Baht (100 US dollars). Many migrant workers with low paid jobs cannot afford to pay the fees. In many cases, they have to pay more than 4,000 Baht for bribe. About 20 per cent of the refugee and migrant populations are of school age children and are in need of education.

Refugee Schools

About 30,000 students are attending schools in refugee camps - from primary to senior secondary levels. There are about 1,000 teachers. At the beginning of a school year, the number of students is higher because young people inside Burma cross the border and come into refugee camps to get an education. The Karenni ethnic armed opposition group (Karenni National Progressive Party - KNPP) controls schools in two Karenni refugee camps and Karen ethnic armed opposition group (Karen National Union - KNU) controls schools in seven Karen refugee camps with the support of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Curriculums are based on political and nationalist ideas. Teachers are recruited from the refugee population and are not well qualified. Where native English speakers go to the camps and teach English, the students' level of English is relatively higher than students inside Burma. However, the overall level of education does not show much improvement. One good thing is that almost all children in camps attend school. Because education is free in camps and parents get food rations, children do not need to work - or there no is available work anyway. About two hundred young people in camps complete their secondary education every year. Some twenty-five students from camps are selected to join an intensive college foundation course (ICFC) in Chiang Mai supported by Open Society Institute (OSI) and have the opportunity to get higher education supported by scholarship. Other young people have no chance to continue their studies and some work as teachers or medics in camps.

Migrant Schools

Many Burmese migrants came to Thailand with their family. Some got married while in Thailand and have children. These children need to attend school. Since the parents are working illegally in Thailand and children do not understand Thai, they cannot attend Thai schools. In theory, every school age child can go to a Thai school but, in practice, these children are denied schooling because they are not Thai citizens. Some Burmese communities in Thailand have their own schools and teach Burmese, Karen, English, and Thai languages, and mathematics to the children. Some parents want their children to attend schools that teach in Burmese or Karen language to preserve their own language and culture. In the Mae Sot area alone (near the Burma border), there are about forty schools (many are one-classroom schools) attended by 2,000 students. There are some schools in Mahachai area (near Bangkok) and Phuket peninsula. A few hundred children get education in these "migrant" schools. These are children who live near the schools with parents who want to give them education. Many other children live at a distance from schools, with parents who move from place to place for their jobs, or with parents who need their older children to work to earn money or to look after the smaller children. Consequently, these children have little opportunity to learn.

Furthermore, the migrant workers themselves need education and training. Their old skills and disrupted education in Burma do not fit the requirements of the Thai economy. They need to learn more to improve their skills.

Educational activities of exiled educators

This author and his colleagues started an education program along the Burma-Thai border in 2000. They met with community leaders, teachers and educators and learned that there were enormous needs for the education of the younger generation in the border areas. They found many problems including lack of schools, shortage of teachers, insufficient training of the teachers, and disputes about the curriculum. Unable to provide for all their needs, they decided to contribute their knowledge and skills by organizing teacher training and education seminars, and offering professional advice on curriculum development. Since the beginning of the program, the Center for International Studies in Education, University of Newcastle, United Kingdom has been helping them organize seminars and teacher training.

A teacher training center

A 2001 teacher training course[3] in Chiang Mai, Thailand for Burmese teachers prompted two Burmese trainers, Thein Lwin, Ph.D. and Nan Lung, to establish an independent educational institute called the Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers (TTBT) in February 2002. They thought that the establishment of such an educational institute is necessary because students need qualified teachers both inside Burma and in the refugee camps. TTBT was established as an education foundation serving the needs of schools in Burmese refugee camps, areas of internally displaced persons, remote areas of Burma, and areas of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. It seeks to improve the quality of education in these schools by training new teachers, promoting active learning, critical thinking and democratic practice in schools, providing professional development opportunities for teachers, and developing educational policy and practice. Its program offers basic teacher training, advanced teacher training, and Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) workshops. The program focuses on primary and junior secondary education.

Basic teacher training

The basic teacher training course of TTBT is based on the experience of the 2001 teacher training held in Chiang Mai. The 2001 training was a three-month course with thirty-one students. A training of trainers' workshop in Chiang Mai followed this course with six students from the 2001 training and two Kachin teachers. From 2002, TTBT has been holding its own basic teacher training course under a six-month program. The training course offers teaching strategies in literacy, numeracy, social studies and sciences across the curriculum. These courses were designed to help teachers get appropriate basic knowledge in education and to promote active learning. Mary Wootten and Steve Wootten of University of Newcastle came to Chiang Mai for a month in 2001 and taught lesson planning, curriculum development, and assessment of students' performance.

There were fourteen students in 2002, twenty-five students in 2003, and twenty-three students in 2004 completing the six-month training. The students were awarded a 'Certificate in Education' upon completion of the training. The students were selected from different ethnic nationality groups of Burma. The selection tried to ensure an ethnic and gender balance but most were Karen nationals because the majority of applications were from Karen refugee camps. Almost all students (approximately 80%) went back to their communities and now work as teachers.

Advanced teacher training

The advanced teacher training program aims to provide professional development opportunities for experienced teachers. In 2002, six students were sent to study at the University of Newcastle in the United Kingdom. The Prospect Burma and Open Society Institute supported the scholarship program. Five students were awarded Bachelor in Philosophy in Education and one student (Nan Lung) was awarded Master of Education in Special Educational Needs. After the study, Nan Lung continued working in the teacher-training program of TTBT while the other students went back to their respective communities – Kachin, Karenni, Karen and Mon – to continue their work in education.

Due to high cost of studying abroad, TTBT initiated an Advanced Teacher Training Course in Chiang Mai. The Advanced Teacher Training Course, an intensive three-month course, started in March 2005 as a pilot program. Nineteen teachers joined the course (fifteen teachers from private schools in Rangoon, Mandalay and Myitkyina; four teacher trainers from the Karen Education Project based in Mae Sot and working in refugee camps). The participants were awarded the 'Advanced Teacher Training Certificate.' All participants hold at least a first degree from a university inside Burma except one participant from Kachin who graduated from the Maijayan Teacher Training School. Two participants from the Karen Education Project hold master degrees. They all have teaching experiences.

The training course currently offers the following content:[4]

- Theories of Learning
- Multiple Intelligences (Howard Gardner) and similar theories
- Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT 8 Guidebooks)
- Assessing Pupils' Progress
- Practical Classroom Management
- Study Skills and Thinking Skills
- Special Educational Needs
- Education for Human Needs and Well-Being
- Art in Education.

Theories of learning include different learning styles of students. Multiple intelligences was introduced to appreciate the students' different

skills and to use different teaching strategies to meet their (students') varied abilities. Practical classroom management is designed to change classroom setting to encourage students' active participation. It also discusses and practices lesson planning. The use of formative assessment[5] rather than traditional summative assessment[6] is encouraged. The program on 'special educational needs' for the children with learning difficulties is most needed for children in refugee camps and those with learning and language difficulties.

Human rights education may be understood to begin with a number of basic questions related to human needs and well-being. These key questions are:

1) What essential needs must be satisfied in order for humans to live good lives? What does it mean to live a good life?
2) What moral imperatives guide humans as they try to satisfy these essential needs, i.e., to create a community/world in which they can be satisfied?
3) What recourse do humans have when these essential needs are disrespected or ignored?

Although it often has other more specific objectives, human rights education aims broadly to develop young people's capacity to engage in moral reasoning about these key questions by helping them understand the foundations of [or reasons for] their own moral choices as they approach the questions. This course of 10 sessions will explore ways of achieving this objective through (1) a "human rights friendly" approach to classroom management; (2) integration of teaching methods that promote moral reasoning about human needs and well-being across the curriculum and (3) inclusion of content that encourages thinking about the key questions above in a number of academic disciplines at different grade levels. Insofar as participants are interested, the course can also explore approaches to the teaching of international human rights specifically. Finally, (4) it will address the question of how to assess and evaluate learning of moral reasoning.

Specific Topics:

1) Understanding the ethical framework for addressing the key questions: the teacher as ethicist
2) Creating a "human rights friendly" classroom environment and approach to teaching
3) Creating a social/cultural context for addressing the key questions: community, cooperation and care as essential components of moral reasoning about human needs and well-being
4) The importance of effective questioning as the most basic of all participatory teaching methods; how to elicit important questions from students
5) Addressing the key questions across the curriculum: methods, activities and content for developing moral reasoning about human needs and well-being in the social sciences, arts, and sciences
6) [Optional] Studying human rights directly: The international human rights system; globalization and human rights; culture and human rights
7) Assessment and evaluation in a "human rights friendly" learning environment: creating opportunities for students to apply moral reasoning.

The 'educating for human needs and well-being' course was written by Mary Purkey, a human rights educator in the Champlain Regional College, Lennoxville, Canada. The course has the following description and content:

The participants were interested in the subjects and participated actively. They said 'human rights friendly learning environment' can be included in their classroom teaching while they are teaching subjects such as social studies and languages without talking about 'human rights violations in Burma'. The teachers thought that teaching about democracy and human rights might be considered as a crime and possibly lead to punishment by the regime.

From 2002 to 2004, educators from the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) have been invited to provide one-week human rights courses at the TTBT training. With participants from refugee camps, the courses provided direct human rights training because teachers in camps can teach human rights explicitly. In 2005, we changed the three-month course focusing on Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) and education for human needs and well-being. The training focused on student-centered teaching strategies and democratic practice in the classroom. Due to visa difficulties, we organized three-month, rather than six-month, training course. These changes were mainly aimed at adjusting to the 2005 course participants who were teachers from inside Burma and who were reluctant to join a training that includes criticism of the military regime and its human rights violations. They had to go back to Burma and were worried of being investigated by the military regime for participating in politics.

Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking

RWCT course covers democracy, human rights and peace education implicitly. The RWCT project is based on the idea that democratic practices in schools play an important role in the transition toward democratic societies. Active in thirty countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Latin America and Southeast Asia, RWCT introduces research-based instructional methods to teachers and teacher educators. These methods are designed to help students think reflectively, take ownership for their personal learning, understand the logic of arguments, listen attentively, debate confidently, and become independent lifelong learners.

The program can be used in all grades and subjects within the existing curriculums. The RWCT Northern Thailand project for Burmese teachers is a part of the international RWCT program initiated and funded by the International Reading Association and Open Society Institute based in Washington D.C. and New York respectively.

In 2002, twenty-five teachers from Karenni and Karen camps and from Mae Sot joined the first RWCT workshops. In 2003, these participants organized workshops in Karenni Camp 1, Mae Khong Kha Karen Camp and Mae Sot. Ninety teachers joined in 2003. In 2004, the RWCT workshops were organized in six places – two Karenni camps, two Karen camps, Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. One hundred and sixty teachers joined in the third year. In December 2004, RWCT extended to Kachin State, Northern Burma upon the invitation of Kachin leaders. TTBT held a four-week RWCT workshop attended by forty teachers.

Other training activities

TTBT also provided special training courses for non-teachers. In 2005, TTBT held a forty-hour training course on teaching technique to the medical trainers working at Dr. Cynthia Maung's clinic and from inside Burma. The course included adult education, general teaching strategies in science, lesson planning, assessment and evaluation. With 50,000 Burmese migrants registered with the Thai government along with another 50,000 undocumented

Burmese around Chiang Mai working in factories, night market, hotels, restaurants, sex shops and construction sites, TTBT considered establishing a learning center for them. Through the Migrant Learning Center, which provides language (Thai and English languages) and computer training, six hundred workers have completed their courses. Currently, two hundred migrant workers are attending the courses. The center intends to offer occupational training in the future.

Also in 2005, TTBT organized an education program for those affected by the tsunami. TTBT organized a training course for teachers of schools established in the Phuket peninsula after the tsunami for the children of Burmese workers. The training course included special education for children suffering from trauma, teaching techniques, lesson planning, and classroom management. The course was held in cooperation with NGOs working in the area.

Challenges Faced

Working with only a few colleagues and inadequate resources, the improvement TTBT can make in the educational situation of Burma is limited. However, it has been able to provide teacher training to young people who completed their secondary education in refugee camps and who wish to become teachers. It also invited teachers working at community schools in the ceasefire areas and migrant schools in Mae Sot area. These people came to Chiang Mai to attend the training without proper travel documents. Negotiation with local Thai authorities made this happen. But from 2004, the participants found it more difficult to go to Chiang Mai. As a result, the TTBT training team had to visit border regions to provide training there. The same situation faced some of the local trainers who have no proper documents to travel to Thailand.

In 2005, TTBT invited teachers from inside Burma with travel documents to join six-month training in Chiang Mai. But since it was difficult to obtain six-month visa, the six-month training course was changed to a three-month intensive course. The participants were teachers from community and private schools especially for disadvantaged children. Teachers from the government schools were not invited.

Within six years, almost all teachers working at migrant schools in Mae Sot area have completed the TTBT training in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. TTBT staff frequently visited the schools, met the teachers and provided feedback to their questions. During the last six years, TTBT has trained over 1,000 teachers. The number includes training courses in Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, refugee camps on the Burma-Thailand border, Khao Lak, Mahachai Kachin, Mandalay, Twantae, Thanlyin and Bago. In 2005, one hundred twenty-three teachers completed the TTBT training courses (nineteen in Chiang Mai, forty-four in Mae Sot, twenty-two in Khao Lak, sixty inside Burma). In 2006, two hundred fifty-two teachers completed the training (forty in Chiang Mai, twelve in Mahachai and two hundred inside Burma). As earlier mentioned, second generation training inside Burma does not include direct teaching of human rights but they are woven into their discussions. TTBT believes that this program serves as capacity-building in education and will help in the future educational development of Burma.

TTBT is trying to affiliate the program with Chiang Mai University and get a certificate of accreditation, which will facilitate the issuance of study visas for the students and official recognition of the education program by an academic institution. Official accreditation, however, means payment of international student fees. Since the program relies on donation, such fees are beyond our means.

Evaluation

Over one thousand three hundred teachers received training from the TTBT program

in six years. Twenty per cent of this number quit their teaching job – some went to a third country for resettlement, some changed to other jobs with better income, and some undertook other training such as on media and human rights advocacy. About one thousand teachers entered the classrooms to teach forty thousand students. It is expected that these teachers would provide students a student-centered education, and promote active participation and critical thinking.

According to some teachers who graduated from TTBT, students are more active than before. They are happy in the classrooms and want to go to school every day. Through classroom observation, it is clear that students are active. However, there has been no research about the students' level of critical thinking. Some teachers in refugee camps revealed that during the passive teaching/learning era, students were quiet and obeyed the teachers. Now they are active and do not show their respect to their teachers. For example, some students dare to fight their teachers. In the past, students do not smoke in front of teachers because they (teachers) do not like smoking not only at school but also at home. Today, students not only smoke but also drink alcohol in front of the teachers. This perceived problem will be considered through such approaches as classroom management techniques, lesson planning and moral education.

One thousand is a small number compared with the thousands of teachers in Burma. In a school, only one or two teachers who received TTBT training might employ new teaching approaches while the other twenty or thirty teachers would continue to use traditional rote learning strategies. TTBT employs a policy of equality – regional equality, ethnic equality and gender equality – which limits to a few teachers from a school the opportunity to join the training. In the future, school-based training has to be employed so that all teachers practice new teaching strategies in each school.

Conclusion

Moral education has been missing in the Burmese education system for many years. During the British administration, colonial education was introduced and moral education was not included in the school curriculum. The Burmese nationalist movement created schools which promoted education to fight imperialism, rather than civic and moral education. Under the General Ne Win government, socialist moral values were deemed more important than the spiritual values of moral development. This was known as the Burmese way to socialism. The current military regime does not give a place to moral values in education. The lack of moral consideration is not only the fault of the military regime but also of exiled opposition groups. Education in the ethnic army-controlled areas has a similar tradition - fighting the Burmese army is seen as more important than peaceful coexistence.

Lack of moral education for many years in every part of Burma has resulted in corruption prevailing everywhere. It is not only material corruption but also mental corruption such as cheating, bribing, 'pleasing up and pressing down'. This article does not intend to humiliate people but highlight the importance of moral development in Burmese society. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is an excellent role model of moral authority. Based on good practices elsewhere, moral education should be included in Burmese school curriculum and TTBT training should teach moral education. Further discussion on the relationship between moral education and religious education would be needed in this regard.

Human rights education which aims broadly to develop young people's capacity to engage in moral reasoning should be included in Burmese education system. TTBT will develop a program on the integration of teaching methods that promote moral reasoning about human needs and well-being across the curriculum.

Endnotes

* Thein Lwin, PhD, is the Program Director of Teacher Training Center for Burmese Teachers.

[1] *Education in Burma (1945-2000)*. The paper can be viewed at www.educationburma.net

[2] It is obvious that forty percent of children never attend school and almost three-quarters fail to complete primary education (see *Education in Burma,* page 63)

[3] The 2001 teacher training course organized by Thein Lwin, Ph.D. and Nan Lung was held under the auspices by the National Health and Education Committee (NHEC) – an umbrella political organization coordinating health and education along the Burma-Thailand border.

[4] Based on the May 2006 three-month intensive Advanced Teacher Training Certificate course.

[5] Formative assessment is often done at the beginning or during a program, thus providing the opportunity for immediate evidence for student learning in a particular course or at a particular point in a program. Classroom assessment is one of the most common formative assessment techniques. The purpose of this technique is to improve quality of student learning and should not be evaluative or involve grading students. This can also lead to curricular modifications when specific courses have not met the student learning outcomes. Classroom assessment can also provide important program information when multiple sections of a course are taught because it enables programs to examine if the learning goals and objectives are met in all sections of the course. It also can improve instructional quality by engaging the faculty in the design and practice of the course goals and objectives and the course impact on the program. Source: www.provost.cmich.edu/assessment/toolkit/formativesummative.htm

[6] Summative assessment is comprehensive in nature, provides accountability and is used to check the level of learning at the end of the program. For example, if upon completion of a program students will have the knowledge to pass an accreditation test, taking the test would be summative in nature since it is based on the cumulative learning experience. Program goals and objectives often reflect the cumulative nature of the learning that takes place in a program. Thus the program would conduct summative assessment at the end of the program to ensure students have met the program goals and objectives. Attention should be given to using various methods and measures in order to have a comprehensive plan. Ultimately, the foundation for an assessment plan is to collect summative assessment data and this type of data can stand-alone. Formative assessment data, however, can contribute to a comprehensive assessment plan by enabling faculty to identify particular points in a program to assess learning (i.e., entry into a program, before or after an internship experience, impact of specific courses, etc.) and monitor the progress being made towards achieving learning outcomes. Source: www.provost.cmich.edu/assessment/toolkit/formativesummative.htm