Editorial Reflection:
Education in contexts of conflict and forced displacement in Myanmar

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Since the 2021 coup, over 3.2 million people have been internally displaced, and over 5,000 civilians have been killed in the ongoing violent conflict in Myanmar (UNHCR, 2025). The mandatory conscription law enforced by the junta on 10 Feb 2024 has led to arbitrary arrests and forced recruitment of young men and women, and many have been forced to flee the country (Mishra, 2025). As of April 2025, more than 144,800 people have fled to neighbouring countries including Thailand, India and Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2025). The devastating earthquake on 28 March killed at least 3,700 people, adding another layer of humanitarian disaster amid ongoing violent clashes between the military junta and resistance groups. Rohingya people continue to be displaced from northern Rakhine despite the border closure between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and an estimated 650, nearly half of them children, are reported to have perished during the dangerous journey (Mishra, 2025). The ongoing humanitarian catastrophe has caused enormous stress on children and families, and humanitarian aid in conflict-affected and hard to reach regions remains perilous due to ongoing fighting and restrictions imposed by the junta. There are reports of widespread violations of human rights as well as children's right to education (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Amid the ongoing crisis, education has been severely disrupted. An estimated 30% of teachers, which makes the second largest group of civil servants after medical workers participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), have been dismissed (Bhatta *et al*, 2023), and the junta-led State Administration Council (SAC) has transformed schools and universities into spaces of surveillance, fear and sites of violence. Enrolments in state schools have declined by almost 50% and international development partners have entirely withdrawn their funding from the state-led Ministry of Education (South, Stenning and Schroeder, 2024). Schools operated by Ethnic Education Providers (EEPs) have seen an increase in student numbers as many families have been displaced to territories controlled by Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). Some EEPs have taken over schools in the areas that are now under the control of their respective EAOs, and the National Unity Government (NUG), a Myanmar government in exile opposing the military regime, governs many schools in areas controlled by People's Defence Forces (PDF). Many of the NUG schools are managed by CDM teachers, who teach using the existing national curriculum textbooks that are often downloaded from the internet. However, parents are frequently confronted with the dilemma about which school to choose for their children. As South, Stenning and Schroeder (2024, p.331) note, 'enrolment in non-state schools risks retribution from the military, but enrolment in SAC-endorsed schools exposes children to the military's propaganda and reprisals from the anti-junta opposition'.

Projecting a vision of inclusive political future through education

The development of education in Myanmar has been critisised as being part of a wider nation-building project of 'Burmanisation' – the imposition of Bamar culture, the Burmese language, identity, and political dominance aimed at assimilating diverse ethnic groups (Lall, 2020). Ethnic communities have long resisted this process by establishing their own education systems that preserve their languages, cultural identities, and traditional ways of life (Rinehart *et al*., 2024). At

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different moments of Myanmar's political history, there have been attempts, albeit superficial, to recognise the aspirations of ethnic communities through decentralisation or federalising educational governance (Lall, 2020). Since the 2021 coup, the agenda of federalism has resurfaced more explicitly among the anti-junta political groups. Even though federal democracy is widely supported in Myanmar, interpretations of what it means differ significantly (Chew and Jap, 2024).

Education has also become a domain of political scuffle between the military regime and its political opposition. The military regime imposed the National Education Law 2023 to reverse the progress made towards recognition of ethnic languages, curricula and cultural identities during 2016 – 2021. Under this law, the provincial governments are no longer allowed to practise mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE). In the opposition held areas, 'the post-coup environment has facilitated the development of a federated education system that may become a driver of peace' (South, Stenning and Schroeder, 2024, p.327). To this end, a promising development is the emergence of NUG-led state-level coordination and consultation bodies across Kachin, Mon, Karenni, Chin, Shan states and the Sagaing region. The State Consultative Councils are spread beyond the traditional stronghold of EAOs and are often represented by members from CDM, EAOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). NUG's Federal Education Policy – 2023 [1], developed by the National Unity Consultative Council paves the way for enacting the federal model of educational governance (NUCC, 2023). The policy aligns with NUG's Federal Democracy Charter that guarantees respect for the inherent rights and human dignity of ethnic nationalities, and rights of democracy, equity and self-determination that is based on freedom, justice, and equality (NUG, 2022).

Among several other reforms, the right to education in the mother tongue needs to remain a key priority. Prior to the 2021 coup, the civilian-led government had initiated MTB-MLE in five ethnic states. Even though this policy was not fully implemented due to lack of adequate funding and a challenging political landscape with competing priorities, NUG's latest federal education policy guarantees the provision of

'MTB-MLE for nationalities whose mother language is not Burmese,' further stating that 'the policy will include provisions for respective states in the federal democratic union to negotiate a 'core curriculum' (NUCC, 2023, p.2). Despite NUG's commitment to local autonomy and self-determination in education, the process of developing the policy has rather reflected 'centralized decentralization' (South, Stenning and Schroeder, 2024, p.328), failing to create opportunities for diverse EEPs to deliberate and decide on the kind of national education system that would address their needs.

Crucially, building trust among all EEPs and harnessing their decades of experience in managing ethnic education provisions is essential to ensuring collective ownership of any future education system that serves Myanmar's diverse education communities. In this sense, a key challenge lies, as it appears, navigating Myanmar's diverse political cultures to determine inclusive model(s) of education that meet the needs of educational communities and reflect local voices. Nevertheless, these initiatives hold the potential to model a future federal democracy and support the creation of a community-driven national education system.

Educational crisis in contexts of mass displacement

In host countries, such as Thailand and Bangladesh, Myanmar migrants and refugees are accessing different forms of education despite economic hardships, political repression and legal barriers to education. For example, in the Tak Province of Thailand, a network of Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) provides education to approximately 15,000 migrant children from Myanmar (Migrant Educational Coordination Center, 2023). With most Thai public schools in the region at full capacity, and in light of ongoing documentation challenges, many migrant children have few options for education MLCs serve as complementary schools that address migrant children's educational needs by providing teaching and learning in their mother tongue, usually following the curricula from Myanmar (Lowe, Win & Tyrosvoutis, 2022). MLCs promote safety, wellbeing, and migrant children's right to education; improve access to accredited formal and

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1 The federal education policy was presented by the Joint Coordination Committee – Education and was approved by the NUCC on 8th May 2023. NUCC communicated the public through their Facebook post on 8th May 2023.

non-formal education; and strengthen community engagement and collaboration with local, regional and international stakeholders (Lwin *et al*, 2025).

Additionally, approximately 86,000 Myanmar refugees have been living in nine refugee camps on the Thai Myanmar border since the 1980s. Seven of these camps, primarily home to Karen refugees, host 64 basic education schools serving around 22,438 students (Oh, Walker and Thako, 2019). The other two refugee camps, inhabited mostly by Karenni refugees, have 11 schools, providing education to their communities. Education in the camp settings represents more than a technical process of schooling – it is rather a trans-border non-state education system, struggling for autonomy, governance and identity formation by creating 'ideological, symbolic and cultural boundaries' that shape refugee learners' sense of belonging and nationhood as Karen and Karenni peoples (Oh, Walker and Thako, 2019).

Both migrant and refugee education provisions have long collaborated with international education actors, benefiting from external funding, and engaging in collaborations to adapt pedagogical practices, teacher professional development and sometimes to gain accreditation of learning through international academic boards (South, Stenning and Schroeder, 2024; Pherali *et al*., 2025). Nevertheless, inadequate and precarious humanitarian aid, loss of trained teachers to resettlement programmes, and ongoing legal barriers and financial constraints to students' access to higher education, and restriction on spatial mobility in Thailand jeopardise the quality, continuity and sustainability of migrant and refugee education provisions.

In Bangladesh, over a million Rohingya people who fled armed attacks and massive scale of violence in Myanmar, have been living in Cox's bazar. Rohingya people are probably the most disadvantaged refugee communities in terms of access to education. For example, approximately 81% of Rohingya adolescents aged 15-24 have no access to education in refugee camps in Cox's bazar (Hossain, 2023), increasing their vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups, trafficking and sexual exploitation. There are widespread reports of Rohingya youth being abducted from the refugee camps and forcibly recruited in the resistance groups to fight the ethnic Arakan Army

(AA) (Ghoshal and McPherson, 2024). Those who persevere under the harsh economic, social and security conditions inside the camps and remain in education find themselves trapped in the limited, often inaccessible, poor-quality schools following the Myanmar curriculum. Their hopes for the future are shattered by the bleak prospects of returning to Myanmar, integrating into the Bangladeshi society or being relocated to a third country. Even though the opportunity for Rohingyas to study the Myanmar curriculum symbolises a sense of hope and direction, it presents contradictions about their past, present and future. They have endured systematic persecution as an ethnic minority in Myanmar and were forced to flee, yet they seemingly have the only option to study the language and curricula of their oppressor. Camp schools that follow the Myanmar curricula are under-resourced and lack qualified teachers proficient in Burmese. Most worryingly, their educational achievements are not formally recognised, reducing the chances of progression to a higher level of education or employability beyond camps. Accessing the Myanmar curriculum for Rohingya refugees represents their pathway to repatriation to Myanmar as citizens and reintegration into Myanmar society. However, this option seems unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Why this Special Issue on education in Myanmar?

In light of the complex and contested politics of education in Myanmar and in refugee and migrant settings, this ECR Special Issue brings together the research knowledge emerged from several studies, highlighting not only the challenges faced by education communities in the context of Myanmar but also the transformative role of education in reshaping Myanmar's educational and political future.

ECR is a unique academic space that is dedicated to promoting the scholarship of early career scholars, practitioners and researchers who are working in or supporting education in conflict-affected settings. To achieve this, we frequently collaborate with research consortia, academic communities and practitioner organisations to enable researchers and practitioners to publish their peer-reviewed articles in the ECR. For this Special Issue, we received over 30 proposals. Our editorial team reviewed 25 article submissions - each one at various stages of development, and each one representing the dedication of education

researchers and practitioners working under incredibly challenging conflict-affected environments. Even though not all submissions were able to make it to publication, the journey of shaping this issue has been a powerful process of mentorship, collaboration, and mutual learning.

From the beginning, this special issue was conceptualised with the view of creating a space for voices from the field – especially, inviting early career researchers and practitioners from Myanmar to shape the academic discourse on education in emergencies (EiE). In EiE, the knowledge held by those responding directly to educational crises too often remains outside academic journals so, the aim was to make a dedicated effort to bring the research led by local researchers in Myanmar into conversations with the wider EiE community. Most contributors to this issue are deeply experienced practitioners, engaged in supporting education in conflict-affected regions of Myanmar, but less used to writing for academic audiences. To ensure that the process of writing becomes a professional development opportunity, we encouraged co-authorship between early career researchers and more experienced authors with an experience of academic publishing.

Most articles published here are the outcome of sustained mentorship and revision. The editorial team worked closely with each of the authors over the past eight months by providing: a) mentorship when it was needed; b) preliminary reviews; and c) written and dialogic feedback on early drafts, before preparing the articles for external blind review. Many of the external reviewers, though critical, were supportive and engaged, offering constructive feedback. Yet, the volume and tone of comments from reviewers may have been intimidating and disheartening to some, revealing the harsh nature of the peer-review process. In this sense, it was more than a writing process for many authors – publications presented here represent a transition from writing programmatic reports for funders to writing for a scholarly publication. This experience highlighted a stark reality of having to prove legitimacy of knowledge in a narrow, English-dominated academic space despite being highly experienced professionals with deep knowledge on the educational issues in the context where they have worked for several years.

This Special Issue features 13 articles focusing on various aspects of education which have been thematically organised – except the first article which presents a research agenda for education research in conflict-affected settings of Myanmar – focusing on teachers, children, higher education and politics, promoting peace and social transformation, and education as resistance.

1. The first article by **Rinehart et al**. builds on a rigorous review of the existing body of education research in Myanmar and draws on data from extensive consultations with educational stakeholders working in ethnic, migrant and refugee education provisions to develop a comprehensive agenda for future research in education in Myanmar. This article presents four key research priorities that education communities have identified to address challenges they face in their education systems around access to, quality of, continuity and coherence in education.

2. The first section includes two articles that deal with challenges faced by teachers in conflict and crisis settings. **Lat et al.'s** article reveals that ethnic education systems are struggling to ensure equity in and sustenance of teacher salaries for community teachers. Even though bridging of humanitarian and development sectors has improved collaborations between actors involved in educational support, this has done little to solve the problem of teacher compensation. They argue for a problem-based, contextually relevant humanitarian-development response, ensuring that teachers are adequately paid for their work. The second article by **Thwin, Soe and Moe** focuses on psychosocial vulnerabilities of female teachers in parallel education systems in Myanmar. Their article highlights that female teachers demonstrate an unparalleled amount of resilience despite facing the risks of political repression and threats to their lives for working in parallel provisions. They mostly rely on their traditional practices of self-healing, peer relationships and encouragement to cope with the stress. Yet, female teachers are committed to staying in the profession because they view their role as part of the wider political struggle for democracy, peace and social justice.

3. The second section presents three articles that concentrate on supporting learning and

wellbeing of vulnerable children. Jordan, Tun and Khaing's paper focuses on the emotional wellbeing of migrant children on the Thai Myanmar border. They develop a contextually relevant framework to assess students' emotional wellbeing so that educational interventions are tailored around the emotional needs of children living in challenging host communities. Similarly, Whybrow, Williams and Aung's article deals with mental and emotional wellbeing of conflict-affected children in Mon State. The authors investigate the relevance of the Leuven Scales: an observational tool that enables volunteer teachers to assess children's emotional wellbeing in community learning spaces. They argue that enabling teachers with skills to monitor children's emotional wellbeing can help address the learning needs of conflict-affected children as well as improve quality of teaching and learning. Finally, Zetnan and Teresa's article reports on educational barriers to children with disabilities in conflict-affected northern Shan State. It draws on the ERICC Drivers for Learning and Development framework to demonstrate that pre-existing conditions such as social stigma, a lack of disability-inclusive school infrastructure, and limited teacher training as well as the effects of ongoing conflict on schools prevent access to, quality of and continuity in education for children with disabilities. The paper highlights that children with disabilities are more likely to be excluded from educational opportunities in conflict-affected settings unless educational interventions are tailored to meet the unique learning needs of these children.

4. Section three brings together two articles dealing with higher education as a space for political resistance. Awng, Iwasaki and Williams' article presents an interesting case study of higher education initiatives led by non-state ethnic education providers in the Kachin State. As the state-supported higher education system has almost collapsed after the 2021 coup, there has been a growing demand for alternative higher education provisions, creating opportunities for non-state actors to expand their own provisions to fill the gap. The authors argue that the emerging Ethnic

Higher Education Institutes play a critical role in upholding the right to higher education not only for ethnic minorities but also those who oppose the authoritarian regime. However, Mann, Lall and Proserpio's article discusses the critical role of emerging universities in the anti-junta political struggle in Myanmar. Drawing on qualitative interviews with representatives from three 'Spring Universities', the authors argue that these alternative higher education institutions not only model innovative teaching, decentralised structures and bottom-up research but also serve as a critical space for Spring Revolution. In this process, the Spring Universities in Myanmar contribute to the long-term goals of social justice and political reform by empowering youth through education and fostering grassroots resistance to authoritarianism.

5. Section four features two articles on promoting peace, educational resilience and social transformation. Hlaing's article critiques UNESCO's *Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (EPSD)* programme as a Western-centric liberal intervention that ignores local knowledge systems. He draws on Boaventura de Sousa Santos' concept of Epistemologies of the South to argue that peacebuilding approaches should underpin an ecology of knowledges, rather than imposing dominant global ideas, and must address structural inequalities that fuel conflict drivers, in addition to the focus on individual change. Tyrosvoutis, Charoensukaran and Chan explore the different ways educational resilience is understood and practised in Myanmar. They highlight that schools are often caught in the conflict across ethnic regions, causing enormous stress on teachers, students, communities and education providers. Nevertheless, ethnic communities in Myanmar have developed coping mechanisms through strong local networks, decentralised decision-making, adaptability and self-reliance. Amid the ongoing struggle for political transformation, communities draw on the past experiences of educational disruption to navigate current challenges, demonstrating that educational resilience holds transformative potential even in times of crisis.

6. Finally, section five brings together articles dealing with intersections between education, resistance, and the struggle for democracy. Pyinnyarye Research Collective's article analyses different concepts of democracy and reflects on these ideas within the case study of an educational institution to show that conflict can create opportunities to learn in democratic ways, and practicing democracy in education can make a learning community stronger and more resilient during times of conflict. It offers a useful conceptual foundation for understanding education as a process of democratic formations. Similarly, drawing on insights from interviews with CDM members along the Thai-Myanmar border, **Maber** and **Zar** theorise education as a site of resistance to political oppression and authoritarianism, reshaping relationships between teachers, students and the state. As the authors show, CDM activists have created unique educational spaces to resist both the military regime and the state's weaponisation of education against marginalised ethnic communities. By rejecting the historically exclusionary system of education, CDM participants utilise these alternative spaces to learn as well as to boldly reimagine Myanmar's political future. Finally, **Bird, Thin and Thiri's** article digs deeper into some of the 'invisible' barriers that make access to education for migrant learners difficult. Employing critical realism as a theoretical framework, the authors reveal that a lack of legal documentation, restrictive employment regulations, and de-incentivisation of education serve as three 'doors of discrimination' for the migrant population in Thailand.

Finally, this Special Issue is more than a collection of papers – it is a testament to the power of collaboration across borders, disciplines, and experiences. I am most grateful to the guest editors for taking up this challenge and working diligently over the past few months to bring this project to life. We hope this Special Issue not only contributes to the field of education in emergencies but also opens new doors for future scholarship led by practitioners, local education actors, and emerging researchers from across the globe.

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