Conceptualising educational resilience during Myanmar's conflict

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Abstract

Since 2021, protracted armed conflict throughout Myanmar has transformed isolated shocks to education into widespread stressors. 'Education in emergencies' practitioners, both globally and locally, have increasingly described the flexibility of education systems during crises as *resilient*, though the attributes and definitions of resilience are the subject of interpretation and debate. This article interrogates the meaning(s) of educational resilience in Myanmar with a multi-ethnic team of researchers located in six states and regions by employing Shah's (2019) *theory of change for education programming with a resilience focus*. Researchers identified several key attributes of educational resilience: (1) meaningful participation, (2) strong local networks, (3) decentralised decision-making, (4) the ability to work in low resource settings, (5) a culture of self-reliance, (6) adaptability, and (7) prior experiences with disruption. Through the process of conceptualising educational resilience, this article emphasises its transformative potential to enhance and sustain educational outcomes.

Key Words

Myanmar, resilience, ethnic education, education in emergencies

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Introduction

Amidst the backdrop of Myanmar's increasingly complex and dynamic political landscape, particularly following the manifold challenges four years into the attempted coup d'etat, pluralistic approaches to education continue to be the only way to meet the growing needs of children throughout the country. Education administered by ethnic providers[1] in Myanmar's borderlands has endured over six decades of protracted armed conflict, multidimensional oppression, political unrest, and natural disasters to provide learning opportunities for hundreds of thousands of ethnic minority children. Motivated by the challenges facing educational provisions post-2021 and reflecting a broader trend in the education and emergencies (EiE) discourse, there is a growing body of literature describing and advocating for resilience across Myanmar's diverse education sector, including: ethnic education (Rinehart and Tyrosvoutis, 2023); monastic education (Phyu and Han, 2021); public schooling (Hein and Win, 2023); community-led provisions (Leehay, 2020; No, 2024); and e-learning provisions (Gomersall and Floyd, 2023).

This discursive trend is not bound to the education sector: resilience has permeated the nomenclature of responses to Myanmar's present-day adversities. Since the onset of the coup in Myanmar, resilient has been used to describe household-level disaster preparedness (Heinkel *et al*., 2022), agriculture–food

1 Ethnic education providers are often referred to as parallel providers as they exist alongside the state-run system in Myanmar. Ethnic education systems largely provide educational services to populations that might otherwise be overlooked or marginalized, namely migrant, refugee, and ethnic and indigenous peoples.

systems (Tun Oo, Boughton, and Aung, 2023), the resistance movement (Khine, 2022), private banks (Aung, Mon, and Bhaumik, 2024), and led a major media outlet to deem the contemporary struggle as Myanmar's resilient revolution (McCarthy, 2023).

As highlighted by Leehay (2020), resilience is often translated in Burmese as ကိုယ်ခြံနိုင်မှု (transliterated in English as jhant jhant khan naing mhu) which can be interpreted as endurance, steadfast resolve or, when referring to an individual, as inner strength and knowing who you are. The widespread usage of resilient to describe different facets of Myanmar society highlights a need to interrogate the meaning(s) of resilience in this context; as stated by HARP-F (2022, p.12):

How do people in Myanmar understand 'resilience'? Research signals that this can be about more than physical protection and maintaining basic goods and access to services. It can be a deeper mental state linked to prolonged political and economic pressures and challenges. It can be strongly connected to maintaining identity, lifestyle and culture, and ownership over heritage land.

Localised conceptualisations of resilience offer a theoretical understanding of how institutions, systems, and actors are able to persevere during times of conflict and crisis. This also enables the identification of attributes that can be invested in by those that support humanitarian and development endeavors. In line with broader efforts to capture context-specific understandings of resilience, this paper seeks to answer the following key questions:

1. How do ethnic education providers in Myanmar understand educational resilience?
2. How can their educational resilience be supported by humanitarian and development assistance?

Conceptualisations of resilience in EiE

Common definitions of resilience within EiE literature refer to the ability of either an individual, community, or system to adapt, thereby withstanding disruptions and sustaining an adequate level of functioning and structure (INEE, 2010). Since 2010, and against a global backdrop of increasing humanitarian needs, conceptualisations of resilience in the EiE sector continue to rise in prominence (Artyukhov *et al*., 2024). While INEE's (2004) guidelines make no formal mention of the word, the 2010 version defines and refers to 'resilience' 10 times. The recently updated guidelines reference 'resilience' 36 times, including a definition of 'Education System Resilience' (INEE, 2024).

Interventions based on localised conceptualisations of resilience have been lauded for their emancipatory potential to make nuanced and neglected needs more visible (Krüger, 2023). Additionally, these efforts offer the potential of asset-based approaches to system-strengthening in emergencies (Shah, 2019). Conceptualising resilience involves documenting educational solutions by reflecting on past experiences and integrating lessons learned into ongoing efforts to adapt and transform systems (Cutter *et al*., 2008; Arctic Council, 2016). This process has the potential to shed light on previously unexplored response mechanisms in education systems which have increased the system's capacity to adapt to disruptions (Fazey *et al*., 2007). When resilience is conceptualised to a specific context, it has the potential to identify the transformative solutions needed during emergencies. As such, resilience is increasingly recognized as a key objective within the EiE community, and within government donor portfolios (Flemming *et al*., 2023).

However, Shah, Paulson, and Couch (2019) highlight some criticisms of the resilience narrative, including:

1. often being vaguely defined;
2. not attending to the underpinning drivers of the disruption;
3. only focusing on the individualisation of resilience as a resource;
4. responsibilising resilience thereby emphasising self-reliance and reducing long-term humanitarian support; and
5. shying away from the transformative potential of EiE responses to contribute towards building a positive peace.

Labeling educational systems in emergency as merely resilient runs the risk of resilience meaning "everything and nothing at once to those working in EiE" (ibid., p. 309).

Additionally, discussions on resilience have been criticised for fostering deficit thinking (Versmesse *et al*., 2017). This thinking has the potential to reinforce

racist ideologies that frame oppressed people as deficient thereby perpetuating historical power imbalances portraying crisis-affected populations as powerless victims. This framing risks preserving the status quo of development by denying agency to local actors . At worst, resilience becomes a checklist of attributes prescribed to those vulnerable to shocks, shifting the responsibility for vulnerability onto affected populations while obscuring deeper structural causes, such as colonial legacies, neocolonial policies, economic inequalities, and most recently, the climate crisis (Shah, Paulson, and Couch, 2019). With these criticisms and cautions in mind, this study seeks to offer a co-defined conceptualisation of resilience bespoke to education in the ethnic areas of Myanmar.

Analytical framework

Despite the long-standing history of ethnic education providers maintaining educational continuity during protracted crises (Rinehart and Tyrosvoutis, 2023), there has been limited exploration of how educational resilience is conceptualised within these systems. This article employs the analytical framework offered within the USAID white paper, Transforming Systems in Times of Adversity: Education and Resilience (Shah, 2019) to interrogate resilience through four domains of inquiry:

- Resilience to what?
- Resilience for whom?
- Resilience through what?
- Resilience to what end?

This study will seek to identify resilience capacities used to anticipate and mitigate the negative effects of shocks or stressors, as defined in Table 1.

Table 1. Key terms used in this article

Resilience Capacities	Capacities, assets, networks, and resources that support the continuation, adaptation, and/or transformation of services in response to shocks and stressors at all levels of the education system (Shah, 2019, p.7)
Shocks	External short-term deviations from long term trends that have substantial negative effects on people's current state of well-being, level of assets, livelihoods, safety or their ability to withstand future shocks (Zseleczky and Yosef, 2014, p.1)
Stressors	Long-term trends or pressures that undermine the stability of a system and increase vulnerability within it (Zseleczky and Yosef, 2014, p.1)

Research design

This study seeks to untangle colonial legacies that have perpetuated power imbalances in research (Rutazibwa, 2019) by adapting McIntyre's (2008) process of longitudinal participatory research. Decolonising research practice is a long-term process of redistributing power which involves re-imagining the world from marginalised perspectives (Radcliffe, 2017). The research was conducted between 2021-2023 over a period of 16 months with a multiethnic team of 26 researchers from Shan, Karen, Mon, Karenni, Kachin and Kayan regions, representing 6 ethnic education systems.

The researchers were full-time staff of ethnic education providers who were selected by their supervisors for participation in the research cycle. This affords them a local, insider (in-group) perspective when conducting the research. Research practices were grounded in localised ethics throughout the research cycle (Brooten and Metro, 2014) through frequent consultations with local educational authorities in the relevant research contexts, and enabling researchers to determine their own research locations, sample sizes, and data collection plans.

Using purposeful, convenience sampling, perspectives of 469 respondents were captured through focus group discussions (FGDs) with 179 students, 132 parents, 110 teachers, 34 school leaders, and 14 education administrators. FGDs were transcribed and deductively coded by the researchers using Shah's (2019) framework. After identifying the research capacities of the educational system they worked in, the researchers co-developed a shared definition of resilience specific to ethnic education systems in Myanmar during a participatory, consensus-driven reflection activity. The insights and interpretations of the research team were gathered through online and in-person workshops using qualitative methods.

Findings

Reflecting the study's analytical framework, the findings are organised using the lines of inquiry in Shah's (2019) resilience-focused theory of change. The findings culminate with a co-created definition of resilience in ethnic education.

Resilience to what? Shocks have become stressors

It was often challenging for the research team to clearly categorise disruptions as either shocks or stressors as there was uncertainty around at what frequency a shock would become a stressor. What were originally perceived as shocks -- such as airstrikes, conflict, and the presence of military checkpoints – have become increasingly normalised and, in some cases, were now perceived as a stressor (Table 2).

Table 2. Identified disruptions to education

Shocks (Short-term Disruptions)	Stressors (Long-term Disruptions)
• Travel restrictions and military checkpoints • Air strikes • Artillery shelling • Destroyed schools • Children learning in IDP camps and temporary 'schools' • Unseasonable weather, heavy rains, landslides and flooding	• Lack of teaching and learning materials • Teacher shortages • Insufficient teacher payment and support • Inflation and economic upheaval • Food shortages • Many out of school and working children • Regional conflict (ex. seeing/hearing jets overhand, soldiers checking schools, military checkpoints) • Displacement (internally and across borders) • Increased student numbers in ethnic areas • Increased recruitment of youth to armed groups

Widespread inflation due to the conflict and economic decline has made it more challenging to provide teachers with adequate teaching and learning materials. Security restrictions have complicated efforts to train teachers in large groups, visit schools, and deliver stipends on time. Many teachers also fear arbitrary arrest or unannounced visits by security forces. In regions such as Karenni, Karen, and Kachin, where urgent emergency responses are needed, ongoing violent clashes have transformed emergencies from isolated shocks into long-term stressors. In such situations, where emergencies have become persistent, teachers often viewed resilience as the ability to endure shocks that have become ongoing stressors.

Resilience for whom? Resilience requires everyone

Researchers often described education in their contexts as a collective responsibility. In this view, resilience involves children, teachers, parents, school leaders, local education authorities, and the broader school community. Teachers, parents and children have been increasingly trained in risk awareness and the emergency procedures used in crises. In environments with limited access to external support, education relies heavily on teachers as first responders to provide emergency response and psychosocial support.

Across all contexts, interviewed stakeholders emphasised that teachers have gone above and beyond their traditional roles in the classroom. With support from parents and ethnic education providers, teachers have implemented education in homes, churches, temples, farms, and temporary shelters in response to schools being targets for attack.

Community ownership and engagement in education were found to have risen significantly since 2021 and played a large role in supporting educational continuity. Ethnic education providers across all contexts have developed decentralised decision-making, and coordination and monitoring mechanisms which have promoted governance from the ground up. Local education authorities and community leaders have increasingly taken a lead role in determining educational solutions for their communities.

Resilience through what? Capacities enabling continuity

The research team viewed specific assets of the ethnic education systems – decentralised governance, robust local networks, and mutual trust among stakeholders – as critical areas to leverage and strengthen. These capacities empower education stakeholders to respond to crises through collaboration via contextually relevant approaches. Decentralisation was the most cited asset to support educational continuity. Table 3 presents the aggregated resilience capacities most commonly identified by the researchers.

Table 3. Identified resilience capacities

Education Stakeholder	Resilience Capacity (Shah, 2019)	Cited Examples
Students	Committed engagement	• Able to continue their education even when separated from their families
	Positive peer relations	• Students supporting one another in class and taking care of each other out of class
Parents	Community-driven development and funding tools	• Community-led management of schools • Support for school rebuilding and repair and the construction of air-raid trenches
	Mutual understanding and trust	• Collaboration with school staff, both informally and formally through Parent Teacher Associations
Teachers	Committed engagement	• Committed to education, even with insufficient /or irregular salary and ongoing security concerns
	Flexible planning	• Ability to work in extremely low-resource environments • Willing to learn and practice new techniques • Developing teaching and learning materials
	Leadership, negotiation and communication skills	• Negotiation with armed groups • Sharing essential safety information with students and communities
School Leaders	Coordination across religious and civic institutions	• Holding regular classes at churches and monasteries when school-based education was not an option
	Protection of infrastructure, resources and people from risks	• Prepared for emergency evacuation • Support continuity if forced to relocate

Education Stakeholder	Resilience Capacity (Shah, 2019)	Cited Examples
Senior Leadership of Ethnic Education Providers	Decentralised coordination and monitoring mechanisms	• Increased role of township/district-level education officers for information sharing and localised decision-making
	Flexible planning	• Emergency adaptation strategies in place • Provision of guidance on school continuity and back-up plans

Resilience to what end? Peaceful, safer and stronger communities

Parents often saw ethnic education as a pathway for their children to develop a well-rounded character and improve their livelihood chances. The ongoing economic crisis and volatile political situation have, in some cases, reinforced the belief that education is more essential than ever, while in other cases, it has forced vulnerable families to withdraw their children from school to work. Teachers viewed ethnic education as playing a crucial role in fostering students' holistic development and empowering them to contribute positively to their communities. Many senior leaders emphasized the importance of ethnic education systems in building strong, just, and peaceful societies, highlighting pluralistic language policies and mother tongue-based multilingual education as foundational elements in establishing a federal education system nationwide.

A common theme across responses was the role of ethnic education systems in preserving and nurturing ethnic languages, histories, cultures, and identities. Increased enrollment in these systems indicates their importance in providing safe and inclusive education. Local researchers felt that strengthening resilience in education could lead to safer, stronger communities and contribute to a more peaceful society. Additionally, a focus on resilience was seen as vital to supporting communities in becoming more self-reliant, adaptable, and better prepared for future challenges.

Co-conceptualizing resilience

Researchers found resilience in all stakeholders and levels of their education systems. Educational continuity was viewed as the principal goal in times of crises. There were more stressors than shocks included in the shared definition, which may point to the reality that Myanmar is a context of protracted disruption. Decentralised governance, programme adaptation, and dedication to the educational needs of their communities were the key attributes of resilient educational systems. Lastly, resilience was seen to lead to more inclusive schools and communities, which can extend their support to underserved and under-reached populations.

Figure 1. A definition of resilience co-created by multiethnic researchers

Resilience for whom? **Resilience to what?** **Resilience through what?** **Resilience to what end?**	Resilience is the ability of students, teachers, schools, communities –and the ethnic education systems that support them – to maintain continuity of education in the face of protracted armed conflict, militarisation, security concerns, political unrest, economic crises, and natural disasters. Resilience in education is achieved through regular adaptation and learning, decentralised approaches, continuous emergency planning, the ability to work in low-resource settings, and an unfaltering commitment to the educational rights of children. Resilience leads to peaceful, safer and stronger communities, and the maintenance of inclusive education opportunities for all children in Myanmar – including those hard to reach, out of school, and those with disabilities.

Discussion

The co-created conceptualisation of resilience presented in this study resonates with notions of ကိုကြုံခြိုင်မှု encompassing steadfast resolve, endurance, and identity awareness as articulated by Leehay (2020). This conceptualisation engages with the multidimensional interpretations of resilience present in Myanmar by acknowledging that resilience transcends mere physical protection or access to services, as suggested by HARP-F (2022). The intersections between the co-created definition and broader resilience framings illustrate how contextually-grounded conceptualisations can enhance theoretical discourse by incorporating cultural nuance and situational awareness. This builds on Shah, Paulson, and Couch's (2019, p.322) conclusion that resilience has the potential to open rather than close possibilities for transformative change, as there are 'conceptions of resilience that expand understandings beyond the resilient individual to the resilient school, community or education system and that envision resilience not as an end state but as a continuum, equilibrium or ecosystem' . The co-created definition has the potential to serve as a guidepost.

Furthermore, the co-creation process, and the resultant conceptualisation, together effectively address several critiques raised by Shah *et al*. (2019) regarding resilience discourse. The definition's contextual specificity counters concerns about vague conceptualisations, while its acknowledgment of structural dimensions—albeit somewhat narrowly focused —begins to attend to underpinning drivers of disruption. Most significantly, the definition's collective framing challenges the individualisation critique by positioning resilience as a communal resource embedded within social relationships and cultural systems. While the definition could more explicitly address the transformative potential of resilience beyond educational systems for ethnic minorities, it provides a foundation for development partners to avoid responsibilising vulnerable populations by recognising resilience as structurally enabled rather than individually determined. While our co-created conceptualization acknowledges collective dimensions of resilience, it could more explicitly address Shah *et al*.'s (2019) critique regarding the individualization and responsibilization of resilience, and should further engage with how educational interventions might transform the structural conditions that generate educational crises rather than inadvertently reinforcing community self-responsibilization at the expense of addressing wider systemic change. This co-created conceptualisation thus represents a humble advancement in resilience theory that attempts to balance theoretical rigour with cultural sensitivity.

Enhancing the coherence between humanitarian and development assistance necessitates embedding locally-grounded conceptualisations of resilience within programming frameworks. Drawing from our research team's multidimensional understanding of resilience, interventions should bridge immediate crisis response with long-term systemic transformation. To improve humanitarian-development coherence, stakeholders should establish coordination mechanisms that integrate local knowledge systems and collective coping strategies, thereby challenging individualised notions of responsibilisation criticised by scholars. Such mechanisms should systematically integrate education system adaptability by ensuring interventions simultaneously address structural vulnerabilities while building upon existing community capacities.

Pigozzi (1999) emphasises that in the face of unexpected crises, it is not enough to simply rebuild education systems; such situations require significant transformation. There is a danger that in rebuilding systems, existing foundations can be easily forgotten. In Myanmar, however, ethnic education providers have already established robust education systems that are fit for their purpose in the dynamic contexts in which they operate. Resilience has been demonstrated by ethnic education providers and the communities they serve. Documenting resilience capacities will ensure that future support from humanitarian and development actors is built on this foundation. Furthermore, donors and implementing agencies should adopt evaluative frameworks that recognise resilience as both process and outcome (Flemming *et al*., 2023), measuring success through indicators co-developed with affected populations that acknowledge the interconnected dimensions of educational continuity, social cohesion, language promotion, humanitarian action, and conflict sensitivity. This approach would not merely improve programmatic coherence but fundamentally reorient humanitarian-development

nexus work toward more equitable, contextually-appropriate, and sustainable outcomes.

Conclusion

It is clear that fostering resilience must be a key priority for ethnic education providers and other organisations supporting education in Myanmar. The findings within this study point to decentralised solutions which empower communities to determine what is needed in their schools and how those needs can be met. In responding to these challenges, individuals, school communities and organisations drew upon decades of experience of working in adversity to adapt and implement appropriate strategies, programs, and actions. They were able to learn from and build upon a solid foundation of the resilience capacities described in this study. Key commitments are needed to achieve further resilience – most notably support for decentralised educational governance, the allocation of flexible funding for shocks and stressors, and stronger efforts to protect education from attack.

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