



Supporting



**Save the Children**  
Thailand Country Office

# **Beyond Access: Refugee Students' Experiences of Myanmar State Education**

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January, 2015

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## List of Acronyms

ADRA	Adventist Relief and Development Agency
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EU	European Union
GoUM	Government of the Union of Myanmar
JRS	Jesuit Refugee Service
KED	Karen Education Department
KNU	Karen National Union
KnED	Karenni Education Department
KRCEE	Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity
MoE	Ministry of Education
RTG	Royal Thai Government
TBC	The Border Consortium
TEO	Township Education Officer
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
ZOA	Zuid-Oost Azie Refugee Care

## Executive Summary

This research was commissioned by Save the Children International (SCI) Thailand Country Office on behalf of its local partners in order to gain an understanding of the realities facing returning refugee students who are accessing Myanmar state education services. This report provides a snapshot into the experiences of eight (8) students who have returned to Myanmar and are attending government schools as well as three (3) students who were unable to access government schools so are attending private schools. This information is strengthened with data gleaned from interviews with six (6) parents and 12 key informants.

The Government of the Union of Myanmar's (GoUM) current policy on accepting returning refugee students into state education requires students to sit a placement test before being accepted into government schools. Placement tests purportedly exist for Myanmar/Burmese, English and Mathematics. When a returning student wishes to join a government school, s/he needs to provide the documentation from her/his previous school and s/he can then sit the placement test. For example, a student who completes Grade 5 in Myanmar (that is, primary school), studies for two years on the border and then returns to Myanmar after completing Grade 7, must sit the Grade 6 placement test. The situation for students born in Thailand without Myanmar ID or documentation is unclear and needs further research.

## Summary of Key Findings

### Access

- **Placement tests are not systematically implemented:** Only three students had experience of sitting placement tests – one of these students is attending a government school but the other two are at a private school.
- **The documentation required to access government schools varies.**
- **Official and unofficial fees are applied in some cases:** Some parents report paying enrolment fees as well as unofficial fees. Other parents did not have to pay any fees.
- **Unofficial means of gaining access to government schools are used,** such as bribery and personal relationships.
- **Head teachers use their discretion to accept or decline access to government schools.**

### Challenges

- **Language of instruction:** the majority of students in this study said they were coping with Myanmar as the language of instruction. Two students reported having problems.
- **Curriculum:** the majority of the students in the sample were facing difficulties adapting to the new curriculum.

### Support

- None of the students in this study were receiving any kind of targeted academic or psychosocial support, however key informants thought that this kind of support should be provided.
- Two parents mentioned receiving small sums of money from the school for each child upon enrolment.
- There were also reports of tuition being provided for free and one parent not having to pay enrolment fees or give a rice donation because she had come from the camp.

## Recommendations

- The policy on accepting refugee students into government schools, including exactly what documentation is needed, should be further clarified with the Myanmar Ministry of Education. Once this information is certain, it should be disseminated widely to refugee parents, families and students who are planning or thinking of returning to Myanmar.
- Refugee students, particularly those who are intending to sit the matriculation exam, should be given more exposure to the Myanmar curriculum (particularly Myanmar language subject) before they leave camp.
- Middle and high school students should be provided with the opportunity to attend intensive Myanmar language courses.
- Further research is needed to determine how students are integrating linguistically at school.
- There should be a concerted effort to prepare students on both sides of the border for integration, particularly regarding developing an understanding of each others' experiences and backgrounds.
- It could be useful for there to an information sharing campaign between camp schools/teachers and Myanmar schools/teachers. Information on both education systems should also be more widely shared among CBO staff on both sides of the border.
- More research is necessary in order to truly understand the psychosocial support needs of returning refugee students.
- Myanmar government teachers should be provided with in-service training which equips them to facilitate the successful integration of refugee student as well as support these students, some of whom may be unaccompanied, face academic challenges and/or face psychosocial issues.

## Introduction

Save the Children International (Thailand Country Office) and partners have been supporting refugee education on the Thailand-Myanmar border since 2011. Due to the recent political changes in Myanmar, there is speculation that large scale organised voluntary repatriation may be possible in the short to medium term. Therefore, preparing for the return of refugees and finding durable education solutions has become a priority. A key element of establishing durable education solutions is facilitating the return and integration of tens of thousands of refugee students into the Myanmar state education system, should they chose to return to areas where state education services are available.<sup>1</sup>

Although it is not known exactly how many refugee students have already returned to Myanmar, it is estimated that since the start of this academic year (2014/15) alone, at least 48 refugees have returned.<sup>2</sup> The objective of this study is to better understand the realities facing returning refugee students who are accessing the Myanmar government education system. Using Kayin State and Kayah States as a case study, this research provides insight into the following questions:

- How are returning refugee students accessing government schools in Kayin and Kayah States?
- What are the challenges facing refugee students who are attending government schools?
- What support are they receiving, or should be receiving, to deal with these challenges?

This paper first gives a brief overview of the background to this study before presenting the methodology and the current government policy on accepting refugee students. A discussion of the findings is then presented with an outline of potential next steps.

## Background<sup>3</sup>

Since the early 1980s, refugees from Myanmar have been fleeing to Thailand to escape conflict and human rights abuses. Currently, there are approximately 113,000<sup>4</sup> refugees residing in nine temporary shelters (refugee camps) along the Thailand – Myanmar border. The Royal Thai Government (RTG) first allowed support for education in the nine refugee camps along the Thailand – Myanmar border in 1996. Currently, the Karen Refugee Education Entity (KRCEE) provides education services in the seven predominately Karen camps and the Karenni Education Department (KnED) provides education services in the two predominately Karenni camps. There are approximately 33,000 students being taught in 87 basic education schools throughout the nine (9) refugee camps<sup>5</sup>.

Political changes in Myanmar and the signing of numerous ceasefires between the Government of the Union of Myanmar (GoUM) and ethnic armed groups, such as the Karen National Union (KNU), have for the first time raised hopes for the potential voluntary repatriation of refugees living in the refugee camps along the Thailand – Myanmar border. Hence, a significant objective of the Save the Children led refugee education program is to support durable education solutions for refugees who may voluntarily return to Myanmar in the short to medium term.

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<sup>1</sup> Depending on the location, state education is not the only option. For example, there is a widespread and comprehensive

<sup>2</sup> Source: KRCEE/KnED Education Statistics

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from the ToR.

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/media/54370/2014-09-sep-map-tbc-unhcr.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Save the Children. 2014. *Refugee Teacher Profile and Professional Development Needs*. Unpublished report.

The education services provided by the KRCEE and the KnED in the refugee camps are unique and are not aligned to the education systems of either Thailand or Myanmar. There are key differences in the subjects taught, the language of instruction used and the curricula followed. Hence, a challenge to achieving durable education solutions for refugee students is the recognition of refugee student learning by the Myanmar Ministry of Education (MoE) so that refugee children can successfully transition into mainstream State education upon their return.

While humanitarian agencies, the UNHCR and the RTG all agree that the conditions in Myanmar are not yet conducive for organized repatriation to begin, the current reality is that some refugees are beginning to return to Myanmar. These 'spontaneous' returns are not necessarily permanent in nature and are considered by many to be 'look and see' visits<sup>6</sup>.

Refugees who are considering returning, or who have returned to scope out the conditions for themselves, have many concerns, including access to education<sup>7</sup>. For parents with school-aged children, whether their children will have access to education services, whether they will be accepted into mainstream state education and whether their education in the refugee camps will be recognized upon their return, are key concerns. While anecdotal reports (both negative and positive) have been received about the experiences of refugee children attempting to access state education services in Kayin and Kayah States, there has not been, until this research, any attempt to systematically gather evidence on this issue. It is hoped that the information contained in this report, while providing only a 'snap shot', will help both international and local organisations working on both sides of the Thailand – Myanmar border to better support durable education solutions for refugee children and youth.

## Methodology

The aim of this study is to help better understand a situation on which little or no previous research has been done. As such, it does not offer conclusive solutions, rather it provides a snapshot into some of the realities facing returning refugee students who are accessing or trying to access Myanmar state education services.

### *Sample Size and Selection*

Students who leave the refugee camps are not systematically tracked by education CBOs, (I)NGOs or UNHCR on either side of the border. Thus, purposive sampling and snowball sampling were utilized in order to locate returning students and their families. A total of 11 refugee students (seven female, four male; seven in high/middle school, four in primary school) and six parents (five female, one male) were located and interviewed for this research. In addition, 12 key informant interviews (seven in/related to Kayah State and five in/related to Kayin State) were conducted to gather further information on the issues facing returning refugee students and their access to Myanmar education.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Two teams of local data collectors, one each in Kayin and Kayah States, were trained in qualitative research methods and how to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interview took place over the course of two weeks in October 2014. Key informant interviews were also conducted in Loikaw, Hpa'an and Bangkok during October. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated and then sent to the lead researcher for analysis and write-up.

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<sup>6</sup> The Border Consortium. 2014. *What Refugees Say... Comparative Perspectives of Temporary Returnees on Themes Raised in "What Villagers Say.."*. Available online from: <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/news/what-refugees-say/>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Limitations*

Time for data collection was a significant limitation and affected the number of participants who could be located and interviewed for this research. This was mainly an issue in Kayah State where the data collectors were only able to identify and interview three participants. A further limitation was that the research was conducted unofficially in both Kayah and Kayah States and this prevented the inclusion of government education officials.<sup>8</sup> Although the focus of the research was on understanding the students' experiences, it would have been informative to discuss the issues with government officials or teachers.

## **Current Policy**

To date, the GoUM has not publically released a policy on how returning refugee students will be (re) integrated into government schools upon their return. The only information we have is gleaned from conversations SCI has been involved in with the Myanmar MOE together with other (I)NGOs and CBOs active in refugee and migrant education in Thailand; and the experiences of the students we interviewed.

From the information gathered, it appears that the current Myanmar policy requires returning refugee students to sit a placement test before being accepted into government schools<sup>9</sup>. Myanmar MoE officials have said that the placement test is the primary means of gaining access to government schools and that placement tests are administered for Myanmar language, English and Mathematics. For example, a student who completes Grade 5 (i.e primary school) in Myanmar, then studies for two years on the border and returns to Myanmar after completing Grade 7, must sit the Grade 6 placement test. Officials have mentioned that documentation is also required but have not specified what documentation is needed. In addition, the situation for students born in Thailand without Myanmar ID is unclear and it has not been officially stated whether or not students need ID to attend school.

## **Findings**

Due to the small sample size, it is important to note that the findings presented and discussed here are by no means representative of every student's experience. Rather, they provide a snapshot into the experiences of a small number of refugee students who have returned to Myanmar and have accessed government education services. Further, the findings vary significantly according to township/location and this should also be taken into consideration.

### **Access**

Data collected during the interviews with students, parents and key informants indicate various means, both official and unofficial, of gaining access to Myanmar government schools.

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<sup>8</sup> Official research in these areas requires lengthy permission processes. Obtaining this permission was not an option due to the limited time frame for this research.

<sup>9</sup> Minutes from Consultation Meeting on Education for Migrant, Ethnic Minority, and Stateless Children. 17-18 November 2014, Mandarin Hotel, Bangkok.



### **Naw Wah Paw's Story**

Naw Wah Paw<sup>10</sup> is 18 years old and is currently attending Standard 10. After finishing primary school in Myanmar, Naw Wah Paw moved to a refugee camp with her family, where she stayed for five years. When she finished high school in the camp, Naw Wah Paw realised that her options for attending university were limited because she did not have Thai ID and her high school education was not officially recognised so she decided to return to Myanmar.

When Wah Paw returned to Myanmar, her relatives helped her get accepted to a local high school. Luckily for Wah Paw, the headmistress at the time was sympathetic towards refugees and had family living in one of the camps. With the support and encouragement of the head mistress, Wah Paw and her aunt went to the state education department and got a permit<sup>11</sup> for Wah Paw to attend high school. Wah Paw also showed the headmistress her certificates from her school in camp, which the headmistress accepted. In addition to the permit and the certificates, Wah Paw was required to sit the monthly tests, along with all the other students from the high school. Wah Paw was then placed in Grade 9, despite having already finished Grade 10 in the refugee camp. Wah Paw said she felt sad and insecure about going back a year, especially when she saw that some of her friends from camp were at college and university already.

Wah Paw described her experience of living in the refugee camp positively. 'I got my education and also they taught us many things about life. It's comfortable there, I feel peaceful there.' Her experience of school in Myanmar has not been so positive. She said 'some people look down on us here and it's expensive to live. The other thing is that the teaching style is not good, I don't like it, it's not practical. We have to memorise everything. And I'm the only person from camp in my school'.

However, despite these feelings, Wah Paw is hopeful about her future and is planning to study medicine at university in Yangon. She would like to be a doctor.

### **Unofficial Means**

The findings indicate that, to date, access to government schools has been granted to some students unofficially. This could be due to the lack of a clear policy or the lack of implementation of the policy. Either way, it is certain that a number of students have accessed government schools based on the decisions of head teachers or the relationship between parents and school staff. Wah Paw, for example, who returned in 2013, said she thought she had been accepted to the school because the head teacher felt sympathetic towards refugees. A year later, two of Wah Paw's friends (also interviewed for this research) tried to join her school. However, by then there was a different head teacher at the school and these students were refused. One parent also spoke of using a 'bit of bribery' to secure a place for her child and another mentioned how the village head person had spoken to the school on her behalf. A key informant voiced concern that the lack of a clear policy means that families and students have to rely on personal connections and relationships. The worry is that for parents who do not already have established relationships, gaining access to government schools for their children will be extremely difficult and that this will deter some students from continuing their education.

### **Placement Tests**

Key informants in Kayin State were certain that access to government schools is obtained via a placement test. In Kayah State, key informants were unsure. Some had heard there were placements tests and some had not. Current government policy, outlined above, suggests that a system of placement testing is indeed in place, however, only three students (all in Kayin State) interviewed for this research had sat a placement test. Two of these students were attending a private school and said they had sat the placement test administered by the Township Education Officer (TEO) in May, 2014. This test covered six

<sup>10</sup> All names have been changed to protect participants' privacy.

<sup>11</sup> Wah Paw was not sure what this permit was for. However, a key informant mentioned that permits are needed for students who wish to attend government schools in Hpa-an.

subjects – Maths, English, Burmese/Myanmar, Chemistry, Biology and Physics. Neither student had difficulty passing the test. The other (Grade 2) student reported sitting a placement test covering Myanmar/Burmese, English, Maths, Science and Karen.<sup>12</sup> Wah Paw said she had to take a test in May/June 2013 when she arrived but it was not the TEO placement test, rather it was the monthly test administered by the school to all the students. It should be noted, however, that some of the students returned in or before 2013. The system of placement testing may not have been in effect at that time, which could explain why they were not tested.

The policy of placement testing has caused concern among a number of key informants, who think that the government should accept the recommendation letters and certificates issued by the camp education committees and that there should be no need for further testing. Moreover, it was noted by one key informant that ‘because the system and curriculum are different, we really don’t know if the students [from camp] will be able to understand the test.’ This sentiment was reiterated by another key informant who knew of two students, who had returned to Kayah State and were told they had to take a placement test. These students had tried to study for the test but had found the curricula content too different and did not think they would get the required marks to place in Standard 10, so they had returned to the camp.

### **Documentation**

Documentation is another issue of confusion and concern for returning refugee students and families. Documentation is understood here to include identification cards, school certificates and any other relevant kinds of documentation such as family registration forms.

While the question remains as to whether or not refugee students born in Thailand officially need identification to access government schools (see section on Current Policy), it was stated by one key informant that either students or their parents need a national ID card when they are enrolling in school. Key informants and students in both states also noted that an ID card, or number, is required in order to sit the 10<sup>th</sup> Standard matriculation exam.

Another form of documentation that was mentioned by a number of parents is the ‘school leaving certificate’. One parent explained that her eldest son could not get into a government high school because he did not have his ‘school leaving certificate’ from his school in camp. Another parent, Daw Moo, whose story is described below, had a similar experience and said that ‘some of the schools don’t accept the children, because they don’t have the leaving certificate from their previous school’. In Kayah State, however, two parents noted that the only documentation they needed was a family registration form.

### **Fees**

The information collected in this study regarding fees varies significantly according to state, township and even school. Some parents reported paying fees, others did not have to pay and there were also incidences where the school actually gave the parents some money or expected in-kind payments.

Three parents reported paying fees. A parent in Kayah State paid 5,000 kyat (approximately 5USD) upon enrolment of her child. Two parents from the same township in Kayah State reported paying 10,000 kyat (approximately 10USD) per child per year. One of these said he could not afford the enrolment fee for his second child so she had remained in nursery school this year instead of progressing to primary. Parents also reported having to donate rice to the teachers and one parent in Kayah State stated that she had to contribute to the teachers’ salaries.

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<sup>12</sup> The date this student sat the placement test was not recorded in the interview.

Three parents (one in Kayah State and two in Kayin State), reported not paying any fees. The latter explained that she ‘didn’t have to pay the school fees because we came from the camp. No need to pay rice to the teachers either but other people had to give it. The village head person spared us because we are new.’ A high school student in Kayin State reported that she did not have to pay money for after-school tuition because ‘the teacher teaches for free to the students who come from the camp’.

### **Daw Moo’s Story**

“We came back from camp in June, 2013 because my father’s health wasn’t good. But after arriving here, the children were happy and wanted to attend school here so we didn’t go back. If they go to school there, it’s not recognised by Thailand or Myanmar. So, I needed to prioritise my children’s education and get them enrolled here at the school.

I didn’t know anything about the education system in Myanmar while I lived in camp but I found out about it as soon as I came back. As for my daughter, I enrolled her at the government nursery school. The headmaster said everything was OK. She said they can accept the children from the border now.

I had to enquire school by school [for my sons]. It wasn’t OK as they didn’t want to accept the children. Then I met a teacher from [a non-formal school] and he helped me with everything for both my sons. At that time, accepting children from the border wasn’t official and there were no schools who would accept the children from the border so I had to pay 600,000 kyat to the teacher for one son [to attend a private school]. The teacher helped with everything so that my son could attend Standard 10.

The other son is attending Grade 7 now...the school needed the leaving certificate for him. I had to negotiate a bit. I got one school leaving certificate from a school in Myawaddy – with understanding. Later, the headmaster met me and said that they had had a meeting at the border and talked about accepting the children from the camps.”

## **Challenges**

This section addresses some of the academic and learning challenges refugee students attending government schools are currently facing. Issues with language of instruction, curriculum and different teaching methods were all highlighted by the students, parents and key informants involved in this study.

### **Language of Instruction**

In the refugee camps on the Thailand-Myanmar border, the language of instruction is predominantly S’gaw Karen in the seven (7) predominately Karen camps and it is generally accepted that students have very poor Myanmar language skills, especially those students who were born in the camps. Thus, it is unsurprising that language of instruction was highlighted as an issue of concern by parents and key informants, as the following quotes illustrate:

*“The language my child knows from camp is not used here. Only Myanmar is used so it is difficult for my child to understand”*

*“He didn’t know much Myanmar and had never attended school here so instead of putting her into Grade 7, I kept him in Grade 6. I was worried that he wouldn’t be able to keep up with the lessons”*

*“The first challenge is language. I think it will take [the students] around six months to catch up with their classmates. I think that the schools should have special classes for those students who are not really good at reading and writing in Burmese, at least three or six months, and then I’m sure that they can catch up with their classmates”*

While language of instruction is certainly an important issue, only two primary school students in this study said they had trouble understanding their teachers. Of course, this could be because the sample of students interviewed was quite small and does not indicate by any means that language of instruction will not be an issue for returning students in the future.

### **Curriculum**

Dealing with a different curriculum was noted as a challenge, particularly by middle and high school students. The high school students interviewed for this research said that despite having fewer subjects to study, they were having difficulty with science, maths and Myanmar. Myanmar in particular was noted as being the most difficult by a number of students and parents:

*“The subject I dislike the most is Myanmar. I cannot do it. It’s very difficult and I don’t enjoy it.”*

*“I don’t like Myanmar subject. Rhetorical composition is very difficult, I don’t understand it and I don’t like it.”*

*“10<sup>th</sup> Standard Burmese is a little difficult for me. I didn’t do Burmese at [my school in camp] and I left here after primary school so I can do Burmese at that level, but because I didn’t do any Burmese [at camp], it is a bit high for me now.”*

*“They don’t know much Burmese. They are good at Karen and English. They didn’t have to learn in Burmese over there, so they don’t know much Burmese. When they did the exam this month, my son passed in all subjects except Myanmar...they are not good at making sentences in Burmese. They are not happy learning that. Not interested either.”*

It is interesting to note that although Myanmar as the language of instruction has not caused difficulties for the majority of the students in this study, they are having problems with studying Myanmar as a subject. Thus, the discussion of language should not only be confined to the issue of language of instruction but should also take into account the challenges faced by students, particularly in the higher grades, of being expected and required to study a language as a mother tongue subject when in fact they are missing the necessary foundation to be able to do so successfully.

### **Saw Peter’s Story**

Saw Peter is 18 years old and left the refugee camp, where he had lived his whole life, in 2013. Saw Peter is currently attending a private school in Kayin State because the government school would not accept his Grade 9 certificate and he really wanted to go into 10<sup>th</sup> Standard. Private school was his only option.

This year, however, Saw Peter is repeating 10<sup>th</sup> Standard and is studying for his matriculation exam again because he failed last year. Saw Peter’s mother (Daw Moo) believes her son can do well at school but he failed last year because of the transition from camp to Myanmar. She said he went a bit out of control because ‘there was nothing in the camp – only the school and the house but here, he can explore, have fun and he has many friends. And he is at the age of roaming around so he was out of control and he failed’.

Luckily for Saw Peter, his mother can afford to send him to private school for another year. He says he is happy at school but he has to study very, very hard and he is not used to that. He does not know what he is going to do after he graduates, but he is just trying to focus on passing the exam.

### **Integration<sup>13</sup>**

Integration within a school setting is impacted by numerous factors classified here as academic, linguistic and social/cultural. Academic and linguistic factors are only briefly discussed as they have been addressed already. Thus, the main focus of this section is on social and cultural factors affecting integration.

#### **Academic**

There was a perception among some key informants that Myanmar teachers and refugee teachers utilise different teaching methods. It was suggested that refugee students would have trouble adapting to these new methods and that this would impact on how well they integrated into the education system. In addition, key informants mentioned that the traditional culture in Myanmar schools is based on fear and respect for the teacher, whereas in camp schools students have been taught about their rights. Again, the concern is that refugee students will find it difficult to adjust to this different culture.

In terms of teaching methods, two students stated that they were having difficulty because they were expected to memorise large amounts of information and they were not good at doing this.<sup>14</sup> However, in general the majority of students said they liked the way their teachers taught. Furthermore, students and parents felt positive towards their teachers. Parents stated that the teachers 'are good to my kid', 'treat my child properly', and 'treat all children the same'. One student mentioned feeling loved by his teacher and another said her teacher is 'patient and kind'. One student, in Kayah State, described her teachers negatively, saying 'they use too much authority here'.

#### **Linguistic**

The findings from this study regarding language show that students are speaking different languages at home and at school, and that some students have difficulty understanding their teachers when they speak Myanmar. While neither of these students were particularly concerned by this (they said they asked friends, parents or teachers for help), the effect this has on their achievement in school as well as the extent to which they can bond with classmates and teachers, at least initially, should not be underestimated and warrants further research. In addition, it was noted by key informants that refugee students who have learnt Myanmar in the camps speak differently to students who have grown up in Myanmar. This, it was suggested, could be an issue for integration because 'home' students often make fun of refugee students for sounding different.

#### **Social/Cultural**

How to ensure the successful social and cultural integration of refugee students into the Myanmar state education system was raised by numerous key informants. There was a perception among some key informants that refugee students do not have the same sense of national identity as Myanmar students and that they do not know much about the country and its history. One key informant noted that this could cause problems for students when they come back because people will wonder why they do not know anything about their homeland.

Moreover, it was perceived that refugee students may hold a very negative and biased view of what it is like to live in Myanmar due to the nature of the information they receive in

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<sup>13</sup> Integration is understood to mean a two-way process that implies change on behalf of the hosts and newcomers (Feldman, A. 2008. Integration – mapping the terrain. *Translocations: The Irish Migration, Race and Social Transformation Review*, 3:1, 133-141.)

<sup>14</sup> The culture of rote memorisation that pervades the education system in Myanmar is well documented. See: Lall, M. C. (2010). *Child Centred learning and teaching approaches in Myanmar*. Yangon: Pyoe Pin.; Lall, M. C. (2011). Pushing the Child Centred approach in Myanmar: the role of cross national policy networks and the effects in the classroom. *Critical Studies in Education*, 52(3), 219-233. Lwin, T. (2008). *Critical Thinking: The Burmese Traditional Culture of Education*. Online: [www.thinkingclassroom.org](http://www.thinkingclassroom.org)

camp regarding social services and life in general. Key informants wondered how students, and even families, could integrate successfully with these views. At the same time, it was recognised that students and teachers in Myanmar may also think negatively about the refugees and the need for both local and refugee students to have a good relationship with each other and to understand each others' lives was emphasised:

*"We should give the message 'we are the same'. We need to have unity among the students"*

*"[refugee students] will have to be with other students so if a particular class has these students from the camp, they should be welcoming them, embracing them, saying 'you are one of us'. They have to have a sense of belonging otherwise they will feel alien or strange among their classmates"*

The students interviewed for this research did not refer to or describe any difficulties with social or cultural integration. The four primary students said they were happy at school in Myanmar, had friends and liked their teachers. All but one of the older students felt happy and positive about school. Only Wah Paw described her experience of school in Myanmar as mostly negative and this was due to a combination of feeling looked down upon and not enjoying the way her teachers were teaching.

### **Support**

The findings suggest that support for refugee students falls broadly into three categories: academic, psychosocial and financial.

#### **Academic**

Students who have grown up in the refugee camps or spent the majority of their school years there have experienced a unique curriculum, which is quite different from the curriculum used in Myanmar government schools. In addition to coping with a new curriculum, which includes studying Myanmar language at quite a high level, students also have to cope with a new language of instruction as well as new teaching and learning methods. The students interviewed for this study were not receiving any targeted or specific academic support to deal with this challenges. Key informants suggested various means of supporting students academically in government schools as well as before they leave the camps. For example, one idea already being developed in the Karenni camps is to incorporate elements of the Myanmar government curriculum into the camp curriculum to familiarise students with some of the content. Another suggestion was to provide refugee students with targeted extra Myanmar language classes in the government schools. A third suggestion was a dual education system that moves to a single system over time. This would mean refugee students would not have to adapt to a new system suddenly but could get used to it gradually.

#### **Psychosocial**

Again, the findings indicate there is currently no targeted system for supporting returning refugee students' psychosocial needs. The extent to which this is needed or will be needed in the future is difficult to determine on the basis of this study. However, key informants were certain that this kind of support should be provided and they noted that currently, government teachers do not have the capacity to do so.

There was also some concern around how unaccompanied students would cope without the support of their families. At least four of the students involved in this study were unaccompanied. One of them, who was living with relatives, said she thought students would find it difficult to adjust to life in Myanmar

*"Teachers have to know the history, the background, their families, the trauma [the students] go through...so in that capacity not all the teachers will be able to do that so we have to select a few and then give them some kind of extra training to cope with or manage the students otherwise it will be very difficult"*

without the support of their parents and families and that they would ‘feel very alone.’

### **Financial**

The findings regarding school fees differed according to state, township and school. It is therefore difficult to say whether or not financial support needs to be provided to returning refugee students and families. As previously noted, one parent could not afford the 10,000 kyat enrolment fee for his child to attend primary school so his child was still in nursery. Other parents reported being excused from these fees because they were refugees. Moreover, two parents from the same township stated that the school gave them 1,000 kyat per child after they had enrolled. Thus, there is, in some schools and townships, a certain level of (potentially) unofficial financial support being provided to returning refugee families. However, in other areas and schools, this support is not being provided and this has resulted in a child’s education being delayed.

In addition to enrolment fees, students may have to face unofficial costs, such as tuition fees. One student reported paying for tuition as well as books and uniform. She said that students have to make contributions towards festivals or events at school, as well as for things such as new desks, sweeping brushes, water or other classroom items. She estimated that she sometimes pays up to 10,000 kyat per month on unofficial costs such as these.

### **Conclusion**

The variety of different experiences captured in this research suggests that there are no clear guidelines for schools on the process for accepting refugee students. It also means that it is difficult to ascertain exactly what parents and students need to do in order to gain access to government schools upon return. The findings suggest that families and students are accessing government schools through various means. Based on our interviews, the least common means have been through a set placement test. This indicates that the current policy of granting access based on placement test results is not being fully implemented. In lieu of a clear policy, some parents have utilising personal relationships and bribery to secure a place for their child. Documentation has also been an issue with some parents being asked to provide school leaving certificates and family registration forms. Moreover, the application of both official and unofficial fees has varied.

### **Recommendations**

- The policy on accepting refugee students into government schools, including exactly what documentation is needed, is further clarified with the Myanmar MOE.
- Once this information is clarified, it should be disseminated to all refugee parents, families and students to help inform their decision regarding voluntary return.

Once a student has secured a place at a government school, she/he will undoubtedly face a number of further challenges. Language of instruction and the different curriculum may hinder the progress of some students. Integration could also be an issue and refugee students and local students will need to be prepared to be accepting and welcoming of each other. Teachers have an important role to play in this process and currently it is thought that government teachers do not have the capacity to ensure the successful integration (academic, linguistic and social) of all refugee students.

### **Recommendations**

- Refugee students, particularly those who are intending to sit the matriculation exam, should be given more exposure to the Myanmar curriculum (particularly Myanmar language subject) before they leave camp.
- Middle and high school students should be provided with the opportunity to attend intensive Myanmar language courses.
- Further research is needed to determine how students are integrating linguistically at school.
- There should be a concerted effort to prepare students on both sides of the border for integration, particularly regarding developing an understanding of each others' experiences and backgrounds.
- It could be useful for there to an information sharing campaign between camp schools/teachers and Myanmar schools/teachers. Information on both education systems should also be more widely shared among CBO staff on both sides of the border.

Finally, this research suggests that refugee students may need targeted academic, psychosocial and financial support in order to return, enter and succeed in government schools. Currently, there are no mechanisms in place for providing targeted support for returning refugee students.

### **Recommendations**

- More research is necessary in order to truly understand the psychosocial support needs of returning refugee students.
- Myanmar government teachers are provided with in-service training which equips them to facilitate the successful integration of refugee student as well as support these students, some of whom may be unaccompanied, face academic challenges and/or face psychosocial issues.



Published by  
Save the Children in Thailand  
14th Fl., Maneeya Center Building  
518/5 Ploenchit Road  
Lumpini, Pathumwan  
Bangkok 10330  
Thailand

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