MTB-MLE in ethnic parallel education systems: a case study of indigenous language education policy and implementation within Mon National Schools in southeastern Myanmar

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The role of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) has become a renewed discussion point in Myanmar amidst the Ministry of Education’s (MoE) Comprehensive Education Sector Review and in the wake of the 2014 National Education Law. Discussion has risen regarding the role of MTB-MLE in ethnic areas in terms of providing both inclusive education for ethnic schoolchildren and integrative education that aligns with MoE standards.

Since 1972, the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) has provided ethnic education in Mon, an indigenous language of southeastern Myanmar, as well as Burmese (L2) and English (L3). Currently, MNEC provides Mon MTB-MLE to over 26,000 students across two education systems—95 mixed schools controlled by the MoE with some MNEC support, and 136 Mon National Schools (MNS) administered exclusively by MNEC.

This paper will examine both systems, paying particular attention to MNS wherein Mon-language MNEC curricula is used at the primary level before shifting to Burmese and English MoE curricula in later years. We will examine the development of MNEC MTB-MLE policy in addition to the three main inputs of MNS – teachers and their teaching, students, and curricula – and will analyze their impact on learning opportunities, learning outcomes, and integration with the MoE school system.

With education reform underway in Myanmar, the MNEC MTB-MLE framework could be used as a model for greater MTB-MLE practices in education in ethnic areas. We will lastly look at applicability and replicability of MNEC MTB-MLE policy as well as challenges and lessons learned from MNEC MTB-MLE implementation.