

Philosophers from Socrates onwards have commented on the transformative power of education. As Nelson Mandela noted, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world."

But can education transform the current situation in Myanmar? Does the Myanmar education system have transformational power within it?

Researchers generally concede that a particular type of learning is associated with education's transformative power. This education is frequently referred to as liberal learning, and it enables students to use reason, think systematically, imagine a world beyond their current predicaments, and seek sustainable solutions. As the name suggests, liberal education 'liberates' the student from the contingencies of their birth and allows them to envision the world anew.

At the heart of this enterprise is the ability to think critically. Critical thinking, when aligned with powerful ideas, such as democracy and equality, is essential for building a more just society in fragile states such as Myanmar.

21st-century challenges require us to 'think the unthinkable' and seek democratic values. The ability to 'think beyond' can enable Myanmar students to change their country. Thomas Eugene Robbins, an American novelist, said, "to achieve the impossible, it's precisely the unthinkable that must be thought."

Unfortunately, Myanmar's classrooms are noted for their rote memorization and teacher-centered approaches. Teachers echo the ideas of the authoritarian system, which are then forced on students. This traditional, rote learning does not allow students to think, create, and challenge intrinsic social structures.

The conventional education entrenchment has de facto favored the military regime in perpetuating its unconstitutional and undemocratic authority. For that reason, the Myanmar military encourages "state-sanctioned values" in education to ward off students' ability to think and raise difficult questions.

Simply put, the absence of critical thinking in education incubates docility and malleability in students, a tendency significantly exacerbated under military rule. Moreover, the Buddhist respect for teachers, embedded in students' minds from childhood, makes students loathe to question or disagree with their teachers. Overall, religious, social, and political factors inculcate in students submissive attitudes toward people in authority.

To change the traditional education system, international non-government organizations (INGOs) and the National League of Democracy government introduced critical thinking skills and a student-centered curriculum in Myanmar.

However, these much-needed reforms were soon suffocated by social factors. For example, Marie Lall notes in her recent book that teachers have limited time to implement the student-centered approach because they need to finish the course set up by the Ministry of Education. Also, Myanmar's societal mindset values accreditation, certificates, degrees and potential employment opportunities, which are indispensable for individuals to gain social mobility.

One of the authors, Dr. Sheraz Akhtar, observed what might be termed the 'credentialist' mindset when he recently visited community learning centers in the Thai-Myanmar border region. One has sympathy for and can easily understand the individual desire for social mobility; however, this mindset has limitations for changing the trajectory of a nation via education's transformational power.

Before the February 1, 2021 coup, a scarcity of critical thinking skills in the education system made Myanmar citizens unprepared to take on the powerful military. The inclusion of teachers and students in the Civil Disobedience Movement and the ensuing military crackdown with unlawful arrests, detentions, and harassment forced citizens to disengage from the education system. The junta holds a tight grip on the education system, claiming it wants to normalize it. At the same time, it has dismissed thousands of teachers, including university professors, and turned schools and university buildings into barracks and ammunition depots.

Consequently, Myanmar parents and university students have demonstrated their dissatisfaction by not enrolling in educational institutions. As a Myanmar parent noted, “I’m uncomfortable sending my daughters to school, specifically when the military is using a portion of that school as barracks.” The parents have genuine concerns considering their children’s safety and protection.

The scarcity of critical thinking skills and the disruption of education leave citizens in a parlous Catch-22 situation. To put their country back on the path to democracy, students need access to the transformational power of liberal learning. However, given the obstacles the military government sets, seeking realistic solutions for Myanmar students will be an enormous challenge.

Turbulent historical events have shown how education is vital in transforming a nation’s future. For example, many Jewish refugees in post-World War II ended up in Western European camps. Initially, they faced hostility from their host societies, which restricted their access to educational institutions. Nevertheless, refugee scholars and academics took responsibility for educating the next generation. These non-formal groups in confined refugee camps were unconcerned about accreditations and certifications. Their concern was cultivating and nurturing students, allowing them to think the unthinkable and imagine a prosperous future.

A massive obligation falls on teachers, scholars, students, and the international community. Myanmar needs to engage teachers to think, imagine, and create lesson plans and syllabi for non-formal settings; INGOs could help by supporting, for example, teacher training. Additionally, rather than banking on bricks and mortar structures, community centers and online resources can become excellent platforms for teachers and students.

Perhaps most importantly, Myanmar students should read widely about great thinkers who have contributed to democracy and a just world. As the great political philosopher Leo Strauss noted, “Liberal education consists in the constant intercourse with the greatest minds...” It liberates us from vulgarity and supplies us with experience in something beautiful. Through reading, students can learn from those historical personages and events to gain strength, envision things beautiful and plan a brighter, democratic future for their nation.

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