

***University/NGO Cooperation on Small-Scale Education Projects: Nursery School
for North Dagon Township***

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Abstract

Although Myanmar is now enjoying rapid economic growth, its education standards are lagging far behind. To grow strong as a nation, empowerment must be given to the younger generations through a more comprehensive and accessible education system starting with the youngest among them, the preschoolers. This presentation introduces a project to establish a nursery school in a less privileged district of Yangon, Myanmar, lacking education opportunities and with many young children left by working parents playing in the streets. The process of setting up the nursery school started when an educator in Japan contacted the local office of an NGO in Myanmar and proposed such a small-scale project. A dedicated group of residents, who had recently built a church in the same area, demonstrated their enthusiastic commitment to the project by the volunteering of needed time and resources. Accordingly, together with the NGO's local staff, a plan was formulated for the realization of school facilities and an innovative curriculum designed by a curriculum specialist. Teachers were hired and trained in the new curriculum. The school opened in 2013 with 20 students from 4 to 6 years of age. This year, 2014, the first graduation was successfully held. In order to ensure sustainability of the project, local community residents have formed a volunteer committee that cooperates closely with the teachers and students and their families in the management of the project.

Keywords: Myanmar, preschool education, curriculum, NGO, sustainability

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Introduction

Although Myanmar is currently enjoying rapid economic growthⁱ, its once-proud education system is lagging far behind due to decades of political conflictⁱⁱ. I mention “once-proud” because there was a period of time, following independence from British colonial rule in 1948, when Myanmar sought to create a literate and educated population, and was believed to be on its way to becoming the first Asian Tiger in the region. However, a coup d'état in 1962 isolated and impoverished the country. All schools were nationalized and educational standards began to fall. Since then, schools have often been closed due to student protestsⁱⁱⁱ.



Figure 1. Happy enrollee of newly established nursery school.

To grow strong as a nation again, empowerment must be given to the younger generations through a more comprehensive and accessible education system starting with the youngest among them, the preschoolers^{iv}. This presentation introduces a project to establish a nursery school in a less privileged district of Yangon, Myanmar, lacking education opportunities and with many young children left by working parents playing in the streets^v.

Statement of the problem

North Dagon Township is a division of Yangon, Myanmar’s largest city and former capital. According to Wikipedia, the government census in 2012 revealed a Township population of 81,000, with 24 primary (elementary) schools, 1 middle (junior high) school and 4 high schools^{vi}. Most people in this area would be categorized as office workers (white collar or middle class), and hard working. But one can quickly recognize the dire shortage of education opportunities for their children. The only available schools are far away, expensive and crowded. As mentioned earlier, Myanmar needs to move forward in improving its substandard education system,

beginning with providing access to the youngest^{vii}. The early childhood stage is susceptible and a salient part of a human's cognitive and physical development, and it is important to establish a solid foundation for children to be able to evolve a fruitful and productive life^{viii}.



Figure 2. Children lacking opportunity for early childhood education.

Description of project

A preschool more accessible for North Dagon Township residents was considered a solution to the problem. A Christian Church in the North Dagon Township that was established by local residents initially considered such a project when they heard of the possibility of funding available from a Japanese educator. The members started looking for a way to effectively utilize the church facility during the week when most churches sit empty. And, since the church is centrally located, yet in a quiet and safe area for children to learn, members started following through with the idea of establishing a nursery/preschool center that would be able to serve the community. With the help of experienced assistance, the church members were motivated to cooperate together and draw up a plan and proposal for funding from the small-scale education funding that was available.

Main components of activities

one month before the school began including lesson planning and classroom instruction.



Figure 3. Sign on wall of newly established nursery school.

Facilities and supplies

The earmarked church building consists of a large classroom and other necessary space for running a preschool that would otherwise lie unused most days of the



Figure 4. Students of newly established nursery school.

week. Necessary furniture included tables, chairs, mats, TV, DVD player, phone, Internet, laptop or desktop computer, printer, Xerox machine, fan, cupboard, white board, chart paper, flip paper, blank paper, markers, crayons, toys and a bulletin board. These were the primary needs when establishing the school.

Student admission

Students are accepted based on an interview of student and parent(s) together, and a small fee is charged for maintenance of school operations. Admission period is from May to June. The current capacity is limited to 20. In case there is a vacancy, admission of students in the middle of the school year is acceptable.

Contribution from the church and NGO

The North Dagon Christian Church contributed the building and facilities needed for the children to study and play, and the local office of the NGO monitors and administers support for activities as a whole like preparing the curriculum, supervising and providing general guidance.



Figure 5. First graduation ceremony of newly established nursery school.

Achieving sustainability

The school opened in 2013 with 20 students from 4 to 6 years of age. By the end of the first year, the first graduation ceremony was held for six 6-year-old graduates. The school was able to have a positive balance sheet due to careful planning, fiscal restraint and a supportive core volunteers.

Children are developing more disciplined study skills in addition to gaining a sense of hard work, responsibility, self-confidence and even improved community engagement. In order to ensure the long-term success of the project, teachers and staff are working closely together with committee members and other related persons, including the children themselves, in planning and implementing ongoing project strategies and measures.

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Teacher recruitment and training

An international NGO, was responsible for recruiting and training 2 teachers with experience in teaching and, preferably, with a graduate degree in the education field. Another criteria was the candidate's willingness to work for at least a year and have a committed and enthusiastic disposition to ensure the students are taught in a stable and conducive environment. Teachers were trained by NGO staff in Myanmar.

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