

## The Evolution of Community-Led Education Systems in Conflict-Affected Regions of Myanmar

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### Abstract

This literature review examines the historical evolution and contemporary significance of community-led and ethnic education systems in Myanmar across prolonged political instability and renewed conflict following the 2021 military coup. Using a narrative review approach, peer-reviewed articles, books, policy reports, and institutional publications from 2000–2025 were thematically synthesized to trace patterns of non-state schooling, community governance, and educational adaptation under conflict. The synthesis identifies three dominant findings: the persistence of non-state education rooted in religious and ethnic institutions; the central role of language and cultural preservation in sustaining community participation; and the resilience of locally governed systems during periods of state collapse, especially after 2021. Across historical periods, communities sustained education through flexible delivery models, volunteer teachers, local fundraising, and psychosocial support. Rather than serving solely as emergency substitutes, community-led education in Myanmar consistently re-emerges as a durable governance structure that sustains educational access when state systems fail.

**Keywords:** *community-led education, Myanmar, conflict, resilience, cultural preservation*

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### 1. Introduction

Myanmar has experienced prolonged political instability for more than seven decades, marked by post-independence civil war, decades of military rule, a brief period of political opening, and the nationwide conflict that followed the 2021 military coup. As a result, the formal education system has repeatedly struggled to provide equitable and reliable schooling, particularly in regions where state authority is weak or contested.

In response to these structural limitations, community-led education has become vital for sustaining learning, preserving cultural identity, and fostering resilience. This literature review traces the evolution of these systems, from monastic foundations in the pre-colonial era to missionary, colonial, and post-independence reforms, through military centralization in the 1990s, the partial liberalization of the 2010s, and the resurgence of community schooling after the 2021 coup. Across these shifting contexts, ethnic education

authorities, local leaders, and informal networks have upheld educational continuity amid disruption and systemic exclusion.

Despite growing international attention to education in emergencies, limited scholarly work has systematically examined how community-led and ethnic education systems in Myanmar have evolved across historical periods of state fragility, authoritarian rule, and renewed conflict after the 2021 military coup. Existing studies often focus on humanitarian interventions or state-led reforms, leaving a gap in understanding how local communities themselves have historically sustained education in the absence of reliable state provision. This review addresses that gap by tracing the long-term evolution of community-led education in Myanmar and analyzing how local actors have sustained learning, cultural identity, and resilience across shifting political contexts.

## **2. Methodology**

This study adopts a narrative literature review approach to examine the evolution of community-led and ethnic education systems in conflict-affected regions of Myanmar. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy briefs, and institutional reports published between 2000 and 2025 were identified through keyword searches using terms such as *community-led education*, *ethnic education in Myanmar*, *education in conflict*, *mother-tongue-based education*, and *post-coup education*. International organization reports from UNICEF and Save the Children were also included. Sources were selected based on their relevance to non-state education, historical development, community governance, and educational adaptation under conflict. The reviewed literature was thematically synthesized to identify recurring patterns related to historical foundations, language and cultural preservation, community participation, and resilience in delivery of education.

## **3. Research Objectives**

This review aims to:

- 1) Trace the historical evolution of community-led and ethnic education systems in Myanmar.
- 2) Examine how local communities, ethnic education authorities, and informal networks have sustained education across periods of conflict and state fragility.
- 3) Synthesize key patterns, challenges, and opportunities shaping community-led education in contemporary conflict-affected Myanmar.

## **4. Synthesis of Key Findings**

Synthesizing the reviewed literature reveals three dominant patterns across Myanmar's community-led education history: (1) the persistence of non-state schooling rooted in religious and ethnic institutions, (2) the central role of language and cultural preservation in sustaining community participation, and (3) the resilience of locally governed education systems during periods of state collapse, particularly after the 2021 coup. Across regions, community schools have adapted through flexible delivery models, volunteer teachers, local fundraising, and psychosocial support mechanisms, demonstrating how education continuity has been maintained despite violent conflict and institutional breakdown.

## 5. Historical Context

### *Pre-colonial Era (Before 1885)*

Before British rule, education in Myanmar (then the Kingdom of Burma) centered on the Buddhist monastic tradition. Monks provided basic literacy and moral instruction, supported by community donations and royal patronage rather than direct state control. Maintaining these schools was both a religious duty and a means for rulers to reinforce the Sangha's moral authority and the monarchy's legitimacy (Cheesman, 2003). This community-supported model produced high literacy rates, about 60% of Burmese men could read and write basic letters (Harvey, 1946). Wealthier families hired private tutors for advanced subjects such as literature, history, and religious studies. Although informal, monastic schools prepared individuals to uphold Buddhist values and contribute to society (Cheesman, 2003). This long tradition of community-supported learning established patterns of non-state and locally managed education that persisted during later instability (Shah & Cardozo, 2018). The arrival of British colonial rule in 1885 disrupted this system, overlaying missionary and state-run schools onto the monastic foundation.

### *Colonial Era (1885–1948)*

When the British annexed Burma in 1885, education was still dominated by Buddhist monastic schools (Chai, 2014). Colonial rule introduced a parallel network of missionary and government schools that expanded rapidly, especially in ethnic minority areas such as the Karen, Chin, and Kachin regions. Mission schools taught Western subjects; science, mathematics, and English—absent from monastic curricula. Missionaries codified ethnic languages through written scripts and printed materials, promoting literacy in mother tongues, and provided healthcare and social services that fostered social mobility and reshaped ethnic identities. These Christian-educated elites later became key organizers of community-led education during state collapse (Hayami, 2018; Lall & South, 2013; Win, 2024).

Initially, the British attempted to add secular subjects to monastic curricula but soon created separate secular schools (Tinker, 1958) to “civilize” the Burmese population and train clerks and translators for colonial administration (Chai, 2014). Missionaries remained important providers, particularly in minority regions such as Karen, Kachin, and Chin areas (Hayami, 2018; Lall & South, 2013). In Burman-majority urban centers, missionary schools were fewer, serving mainly Anglo-Burmese, Indian, and wealthier Burmese families seeking English-medium education (Cheesman, 2003; Chai, 2014; Tinker, 1958). Tuition fees limited access for poorer households, who continued to rely on free monastic schooling (Cheesman, 2003; Hillman, 1946).

By the early 20th century, the colonial administration established government-run schools and teacher training colleges (Lopes Cardozo & Maber, 2019). English became the main language of instruction, offering career advantages but marginalizing Myanmar's cultural and linguistic diversity (Chai, 2014). The system aimed to produce an elite loyal to colonial authority rather than a shared national identity, sidelining local traditions. In response, nationalist movements established schools that promoted Burmese culture and identity (Cheesman, 2003). Groups such as the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) fought to retain Buddhism in curricula. These nationalist schools fostered cultural

pride and resisted colonial assimilation (Hillman, 1946; Tinker, 1958), laying foundations for community-led education. Alongside monastic and missionary traditions, they shaped the diverse educational landscape inherited by the independent state in 1948.

***Post-independence (1948–1990s): Nation-building and State-led Expansion (1948–1961)***

At independence, policymakers sought to unify diverse educational legacies into a centralized, state-led system. This effort, marked by optimism and major investment, expanded primary and post-primary schools under the Department of Education and the 1947 Education Reconstruction Committee (Tin, 2008). Guided by democratic ideals, reforms extended access nationwide as primary enrolment rose, secondary schools increased, and new universities and technical institutes emerged. Burmese was adopted as the primary medium of instruction, reinforcing national identity (Lwin, 2019).

When Myanmar became independent in 1948, literacy in Burmese was already high, supported by the monastic tradition that had long benefited rural and marginalized communities (Skidmore & Wilson, 2008). Some ethnic communities drew on missionary and monastic models to establish bilingual schools that preserved local histories and cultural practices. Operating alongside state schools, these institutions promoted cultural pride and social mobility. Yet, central policies privileging Burmese and standardized curricula often limited such efforts (South & Lall, 2013; Suante, 2024). Early post-independence optimism soon gave way to tensions over language and centralized control. The 1962 coup under General Ne Win brought the “Burmese Way to Socialism,” which dismantled regional autonomy and imposed assimilationist policies. Mission and ethnic schools were nationalized, Burmese became the sole medium of instruction, and ethnic languages and histories were excluded (Lall & South, 2014; Phattharathanasut, 2025). These measures eroded minority cultural preservation and fueled ethnic tensions, prompting communities to sustain non-state schools beyond military oversight (Htoo & Waters, 2024; Lee et al., 2022).

State schools under socialism faced chronic underfunding, outdated curricula, and teacher shortages (Lall & South, 2014; Maber et al., 2022; Vrieze, 2017). The Council for the Development of Higher Education, established in 1964, prioritized political loyalty over merit in appointments (Maber et al., 2022). Censorship limited academic freedom, and the 1973 Education Law introduced the 6-4-2 structure, six years of primary, four of lower secondary, and two of upper secondary education, to improve quality, though regional disparities and resource shortages hindered implementation (Vrieze, 2017).

By the late socialist era, ethnic education authorities such as the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) had established culturally grounded systems featuring mother-tongue instruction, localized curricula, and independent certification (Lall & South, 2014). Their growth reflected Myanmar’s enduring traditions of community-led schooling and persistent conflict over language policy. Government insistence on Burmese-only instruction clashed with ethnic demands for local languages, linking education to struggles for cultural survival and political rights. Consequently, these ethnic education systems became lasting institutions central to community identity and resilience, developing in parallel with an increasingly authoritarian state that tightened control over education.

### ***Education Under Military Rule in the 1990s***

In the 1990s, Myanmar's education system came under the authoritarian State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), later renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Policy during this period emphasized centralization, assimilation, and the marginalization of ethnic minorities. The national curriculum, delivered exclusively in Burmese, removed ethnic histories and languages (Lall & South, 2018; South & Lall, 2016). These measures reflected a broader state-building agenda promoting Burman identity and restricting minority cultural expression, reinforcing mistrust toward state institutions, particularly schools. Chronic underfunding, poor infrastructure, and reliance on rote learning further weakened educational quality (Lall, 2021).

After the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, the regime tightened control over higher education by closing universities for long periods, shortening semesters, and staggering reopening dates to suppress student activism, disrupting academic continuity nationwide (Rosenbaum, Parikh, & Jain, 2021). In response to exclusion and weak state schooling, ethnic communities created parallel systems reflecting their cultural and linguistic needs. Many were coordinated by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and civil society groups, with authorities such as the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) and the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) leading curriculum design, integrating ethnic histories, and promoting community control (Lall & South, 2014; Bertrand, 2022). These systems adopted mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), KECD using Sgaw Karen and MNEC using Mon, before transitioning to Burmese in later grades (South & Lall, 2016). This preserved linguistic heritage, strengthened community cohesion, and fostered identity and solidarity (Kipgen, 2022).

In EAO-controlled areas, administrative structures enabled non-state, monastic, and after-school programs to operate despite limited resources and military threats. In conflict zones, these institutions provided essential education where state schools were absent. Monastic schools were especially vital for children from poor or displaced families (Cheesman, 2003), serving as safe spaces for those excluded from government schools and offering refuge for war-affected children (Quinn & Martin, 2019). Community-led systems advanced the preservation of ethnic languages and cultures while offering localized alternatives to state schooling. In some regions, ceasefire agreements allowed limited cooperation between EAOs and the state, supporting teacher training and more stable operations (Saito et al., 2024). Occasionally, even collaboration with the military helped stabilize ethnic education (Nicolas et al., 2024). Yet these arrangements never led to formal state recognition.

Despite progress, community-led and ethnic systems lacked official status, excluding them from government funding, accreditation, and certification recognition (Maber, 2018). This absence of recognition hindered coordination and partnership, and because each system operated under its own context and resources, quality and standards varied widely across regions. This fragmented landscape persisted into the 2000s until the political opening of 2011 created new opportunities for reform and limited state–non-state collaboration.

### ***The Reform Era (2010–2020): Decentralization and New Opportunities***

The quasi-civilian government that took power in 2011 introduced major political and educational reforms. Aiming to decentralize education and promote inclusivity, it launched the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) and passed the 2014 National Education Law, which opened space for collaboration between state and non-state education providers, especially in ethnically diverse regions. The law formally recognized mother-tongue education and allowed public schools to teach ethnic languages; a significant policy shift acknowledging ethnic diversity (UNEGI, 2017).

During this period, communication between the Ministry of Education and ethnic education authorities became more regular. Some ethnic schools received limited state support, and efforts were made to align curricula and teacher training. However, progress was hindered by disagreements over language use, curriculum content, and autonomy. Many regions adopted mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) models. For example, the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) used Mon as the medium of instruction in primary school before transitioning to Burmese in middle school. Despite these reforms, many ethnic systems continued operating independently, reflecting persistent tensions and the drive for cultural preservation (Arlini et al., 2023; Lall & South, 2018; Tyrosvoutis, 2016).

Meanwhile, community-driven education thrived in conflict-affected areas. Local leaders, educators, and informal networks mobilized resources, organized schools, and advocated for communities where state presence was minimal. Partnerships between communities and schools supported vulnerable children and encouraged family participation. This sense of ownership strengthened local commitment and enabled the design of education suited to local needs and priorities (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). Yet these fragile gains depended on a relatively open political climate and collapsed after the 2021 military coup.

### ***Post-2021 Coup: State Collapse and the Resurgence of Community-Led Education***

The military coup on 1 February 2021 abruptly ended a decade of democratic reforms and shattered Myanmar's political and educational landscape. Many teachers, students, and university staff joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), boycotting state institutions, which led to mass school and university closures and the near-total collapse of formal education (Salem-Gervais et al., 2024; King, 2022). Students nationwide, particularly at universities, used boycotts as acts of resistance, suspending formal learning to oppose military rule (Chiu, 2024).

Amid this breakdown, community-led education re-emerged as a lifeline. Across conflict zones and resistance-held areas, local communities, ethnic organisations, and civil society groups created schooling alternatives that sustained learning and preserved culture (Salem-Gervais et al., 2024; No, 2024). In Pekon Township, Southern Shan State, local leaders established about 80 community schools serving roughly 12,000 students. Often located in teachers' homes, religious buildings, or open spaces, these schools were staffed by volunteers, supported by parents, and maintained through local fundraising (No, 2024).

Flexible timetables and mobile units adapted to insecurity, while social media and messaging apps helped coordinate lessons and activities (Ayuba, 2024).

Amid violence and displacement, these schools also provided psychosocial support. Teachers and community leaders trained by UNICEF and Save the Children offered safe spaces, counselling, and basic mental health services to help children manage trauma and build resilience (UNICEF, 2019). Parallel efforts emerged from ethnic education authorities and the National Unity Government (NUG); a resistance body formed by elected parliamentarians and activists—which created alternative systems outside military control. These systems promoted culturally relevant curricula, local languages, and democratic values, reinforcing movements for federalism and ethnic rights. Funded by communities and, at times, international donors, they operated independently of the state and shaped the political and cultural outlook of students in resistance areas (South, 2024; The Irrawaddy, 2022). Building on pre-coup experience, some ethnic education authorities sustained schooling under new security conditions by training teachers, updating culturally grounded curricula, and integrating local history and languages. Despite insecurity and administrative collapse, they maintained access to education through close cooperation with communities and external partners.

Village elders, religious leaders, and local organisers also mobilised resources, negotiated supplies, and coordinated with resistance groups and NGOs. Informal networks of teachers, parents, and community members shared materials, relocated schools, and offered mutual aid during crises. In several regions, community-led schools relied on collaboration and peer exchange to sustain programs despite wartime challenges (No, 2024; Rinehart et al., 2024). These dynamics varied across regions, with long-established Karen, Mon, and Shan education authorities illustrating both the potential and enduring challenges of community-led education.

### ***Regional Case Studies: Karen, Mon, and Shan Education Systems***

The Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) faces both social and political challenges in administering a mother-tongue multilingual education program that uses Karen as the primary language of instruction. This model strengthens literacy, builds ethnic pride, and fosters community cohesion. KECD integrates Karen history, culture, and values into its curriculum while managing its own administration, teacher training, and assessment processes. This autonomy enables Karen schools to function outside state control, preserving ethnic identity and resisting the long-standing “Burmanisation” policy that has marginalized minority groups (Lall & South, 2013; Callahan, 2007; South, 2024). Karen education thus reflects broader goals of self-determination and cultural preservation.

The Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) similarly develops its own curriculum, teacher training, and assessments, emphasizing Mon language, history, and cultural relevance. Like the Karen system, Mon education promotes cultural pride and improves learning outcomes despite limited resources, lack of state recognition, and the challenge of coexisting with the formal national system (Lall & South, 2013). The Shan education system, though less documented, faces similar struggles to preserve language and culture within a Burman-dominated context. Community-led programs promote Shan language and identity as part of broader federal and peacebuilding aspirations. Shan educators design curricula and teaching methods suited to local needs and values, supported

by resistance groups and international organizations. Despite resource shortages and the absence of legal recognition, Shan education continues to protect cultural identity and resist assimilation, much like the Karen and Mon systems (Lall & South, 2013; Saito et al., 2024). Together, these cases demonstrate how community-led schooling adapts to distinct local histories and political struggles, while highlighting Myanmar's broader significance for understanding education in conflict-affected contexts.

### ***Comparative Perspectives: Myanmar and Other Conflict-Affected Regions***

Community-led education in war zones is not unique to Myanmar. In Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Syria, local communities have established schools when formal systems collapsed under conflict. In Afghanistan, community groups, often with international support, created schools in refugee camps and rural areas after the fall of the central government (Gyi & Waters, 2023). In South Sudan, during civil war and mass displacement, community-run schools ensured access to education as the government struggled to manage the system (Kipgen, 2022). In Syria, mobile classrooms and e-learning platforms have enabled children in insecure areas to continue learning despite ongoing violence (UNICEF, 2020). These mobile models have been especially crucial in rural Syria and Myanmar's border regions, where they compensate for limited infrastructure.

Across conflict contexts, local agency and resilience are central to sustaining education. Effective models adapt to the cultural and linguistic needs of affected communities. In Myanmar, community-led systems promote ethnic minority languages and culturally relevant curricula; in South Sudan, the national policy mandates mother-tongue instruction in primary grades 1–3, reflecting similar recognition of language's role in engagement and learning (Spronk, 2014). International organisations such as UNICEF and Save the Children have supported these efforts through supplies, teacher training, and psychosocial programs in multiple countries, including Myanmar (UNICEF, 2019), underscoring the importance of community engagement and flexible approaches.

While research on education in emergencies is expanding, Myanmar's evidence base on community-led and ethnic education remains limited, with few studies allowing direct comparisons to other contexts (Rinehart et al., 2024). Existing work often focuses on systemic disruption or aid-led interventions rather than how ethnic authorities and community leaders shape schooling during conflict. Future research could explore ways to integrate mobile and digital learning into community-led systems (Damani & Mitchell, 2020) and examine how culturally relevant, mother-tongue curricula affect learning outcomes and children's well-being (UNICEF & LESC, 2019). Such studies could strengthen strategies for sustaining education in protracted crises. In Myanmar and beyond, community initiatives, ranging from flexible timetables to psychosocial care, demonstrate how local adaptation keeps learning alive amid chronic conflict.

### ***Strategies and Innovations for Sustaining Learning Amid Chronic Conflict***

In crisis-affected areas, community schools have adopted innovative approaches to sustain education amid instability. Flexible learning schedules allowed students to attend classes safely, while mobile programs and alternative methods reached those in remote or displaced settings, ensuring lessons continued despite disruptions (Maier et al., 2017). Recognizing the emotional toll of conflict, many initiatives incorporated mental health and



resilience activities. Counselling, peer support, and coping-skills training became part of school programs, with international organisations providing teacher training and resources to address psychosocial needs (Arega, 2023). With limited external assistance, local communities took the lead in organizing and managing schools. This sense of ownership strengthened commitment and enabled adaptation to local needs. Partnerships between schools and community groups further expanded opportunities for disadvantaged children and families (Wolff, 2023).

To sustain these efforts, communities formed support networks to share resources, coordinate funding, and exchange best practices. Networked improvement groups pursuing shared educational goals proved effective in difficult environments (Anthony et al., 2010; Maier et al., 2017). Communication tools such as WhatsApp and other social media platforms reduced misinformation, improved coordination, and enabled rapid distribution of learning materials, even in areas with limited access (Nolizwi & Thabisa, 2014). While these community-driven approaches highlight adaptability and innovation, they also expose the structural limits of sustaining education under prolonged conflict.

### *Challenges and Opportunities*

Community-led education systems in Myanmar have demonstrated remarkable resilience but face persistent challenges that limit their long-term potential. A critical issue is the shortage of resources. Although these systems rely on local knowledge, strong networks, and decentralized decision-making to sustain learning amid conflict (No, 2024; Tyrosvoutis, 2025), gaps in funding, facilities, and materials continue to affect educational quality and reach.

Ongoing conflict further compounds these challenges. Military presence and violence endanger students, teachers, and entire communities, forcing schools to relocate or close and disrupting children's learning and safety (UNICEF, 2020). Institutional neglect also poses major barriers: operating outside formal frameworks, community-led and ethnic education systems receive little or no state support for funding, teacher training, or certification (Gyi & Waters, 2023). Without recognition, students struggle to transfer to formal schools or pursue higher education.

Another obstacle is fragmentation. Diverse ethnic groups and local actors maintain parallel systems with varying standards, complicating national policymaking and producing unequal access to resources and opportunities (Saito et al., 2024; South, 2018).

Despite these constraints, community-led systems possess significant strengths. They leverage local knowledge, cultural insight, and grassroots agency to sustain learning during conflict, reflecting adaptability and resilience (Arlini et al., 2023; Rinehart et al., 2024). Integrating cultural identity into schooling fosters belonging and resilience, as emphasized in second-language education research (Abbaspour et al., 2012). These systems preserve ethnic languages and traditions, reinforcing cultural pride and heritage (Saito et al., 2024; South, 2018). Their flexibility enables rapid adaptation to shifting conflict dynamics and displacement, sustaining education when external interventions falter (UNICEF, 2019).

Looking ahead, collaboration between state and non-state actors offers a potential path toward a more inclusive education system integrating formal and community-led approaches (Davis & Jolliffe, 2016). Yet, ongoing conflict and mistrust between military authorities and ethnic communities make such cooperation uncertain. Without political change, the sustainability of education in conflict-affected areas will depend on strengthening and resourcing community-led systems, while international organizations remain vital for providing support, protection, and advocacy.

### ***The Role of International Organizations***

International organizations have been vital in sustaining education for children in Myanmar's conflict-affected areas. UNICEF's *Education in Emergencies (EiE)* program operates in crisis zones such as Rakhine, partnering with local and international actors to provide safe learning spaces, teacher training, and psychosocial support to reduce the long-term impact of violence on children (UNICEF, 2020). These initiatives enable displaced children to continue learning in secure environments while addressing emotional and psychological needs.

According to *Mizzima* (2024), Save the Children estimated that more than six million children in Myanmar are currently denied access to education, most living in conflict zones or displacement camps. In response, the organization supplies learning materials, supports teacher capacity building, and advocates for children's educational rights, emphasizing global cooperation to protect education during instability. In a joint statement on March 19, 2021, Save the Children, UNESCO, and UNICEF warned that the occupation of schools by security forces would "exacerbate the learning crisis for almost 12 million children and youth in Myanmar," already worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Save the Children, UNESCO, & UNICEF, 2021). By the end of 2024, UNICEF estimated that about 4.7 million children required educational support due to unsafe learning environments and prolonged closures (UNICEF, 2024). To address these challenges, UNICEF provided safe classrooms, trauma-sensitive teacher training, and mobile learning platforms, while continuing to advocate, alongside Save the Children, for educational protections, reforms, and increased funding (UNICEF, 2024). Yet, even with international aid, much of the responsibility for sustaining learning remains with community-led systems.

## **6. Discussion**

This review offers a historical and comparative interpretation of community-led education in Myanmar, reframing it not as an emergency substitute, but as a long-standing governance structure that repeatedly re-emerges when state systems fail. Across multiple political periods, from colonial disruption to post-coup collapse, community actors have assumed responsibility for educational access, governance, and cultural transmission. Unlike dominant education-in-emergencies frameworks that prioritize short-term humanitarian delivery, the Myanmar case demonstrates how education can be sustained through deeply rooted cultural, religious, and ethnic institutions operating beyond state control. This positions community-led education as a durable civic infrastructure rather than a temporary intervention.

Beyond documenting resilience, this review highlights how community-led education systems function as sites of cultural continuity, political identity, and social solidarity under conditions of prolonged instability. The endurance of these systems, despite lack of state recognition and chronic insecurity, suggests that education in conflict settings is shaped not only by institutional capacity but also by collective purpose and local legitimacy. These insights extend existing literature by emphasizing governance and identity, rather than service delivery alone.

Future research is needed to examine learning outcomes, teacher sustainability, and psychosocial well-being within community-led systems, as well as the long-term effects of mother-tongue instruction on educational equity in conflict settings. Without meaningful political settlement, the future of education in Myanmar will remain highly dependent on strengthening and protecting these community-led educational structures.

## 7. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that the evolution of community-led education in Myanmar is marked by both continuity and adaptation, from monastic foundations to missionary and ethnic education systems, and more recently to post-coup community schools. Across these historical phases, local actors have consistently sustained learning when state institutions failed, preserving language, culture, and collective identity. These findings confirm that education in Myanmar cannot be fully understood without recognizing the enduring role of non-state and community-governed systems.

The implications of this review are twofold. For policy, any future education reform aimed at equity and national reconciliation must meaningfully recognize, engage with, and support ethnic and community-led education systems. For scholarship, Myanmar provides a critical case for understanding how community agency sustains education in protracted crises, offering comparative insights for other conflict-affected regions. Ultimately, this review shows that community-led education is not a temporary response to instability, but a foundational component of Myanmar's educational landscape that must inform both national reconstruction efforts and global approaches to education in emergencies.

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