

Study of the Problems and Obstacles in the Teaching of Special Education Teachers in Yangon and Mandalay, Myanmar After the Coup

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Abstract

This research aimed to 1) study the key problems and obstacles (curriculum, teaching methods, resources, and assessment) currently faced by special education teachers in Yangon and Mandalay, Myanmar, following the 2021 military coup, including how these obstacles manifest across different professional backgrounds and educational settings, and 2) identify practical solutions and effective strategies proposed by educators to address these obstacles. The study utilized a mixed-methods sequential explanatory (QUAN → qual) design. A quantitative survey was administered to 60 special education teachers, and in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 key informants. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations), while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers face severe and systemic obstacles, primarily a "Resource Vacuum" (lack of appropriate materials) (M=4.58) and "Teaching Blind" (lack of standardized curriculum and evaluation guidelines) (M=4.31). The political crisis has frozen institutional support, leaving teachers professionally isolated. This study, guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) Model, found that teachers' basic psychological needs for competence and relatedness are critically unmet. Recommendations focus not on top-down policy, but on practical, peer-to-peer support networks and shared digital resource banks to address these immediate gaps.

Keywords: *Special Education, Myanmar, Teacher Challenges, Post-Coup Education, Mixed Methods, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model*

1. Introduction

Myanmar has demonstrated a legal commitment to inclusive education, notably through the National Education Law (2014) and The Right of Persons with Disabilities Law (2015). These frameworks mandate special education programs and services for a significant population, which included approximately 5.9 million people with disabilities as of 2019. However, a persistent gap between policy and practice has long hindered effective implementation (Htet, 2015).

This gap was catastrophically widened by the dual crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup. The political crisis severely disrupted the education system, halting reforms, fragmenting institutional support, and isolating educators. Special education teachers, who already faced challenges such as a lack of professional development and resource scarcity, now operate in an environment of extreme uncertainty.

Despite the urgent need, there is a significant research gap concerning the specific, on-the-ground challenges faced by this group of teachers in the post-coup context. Understanding their experiences is critical for providing effective support. This study focuses on Yangon and Mandalay, the nation's two largest urban centers, which host a high concentration of special education facilities.

The rationale for this research is twofold: to empirically identify the primary obstacles hindering effective teaching, and to understand the impact of this crisis on teacher well-being. To achieve this, the study adopts two theoretical lenses: Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). SDT provides a framework for understanding teachers' internal motivation by examining their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The JD-R Model is used to analyze the external environment, balancing the high Job Demands (e.g., emotional strain, lack of policy) against the scarce Job Resources (e.g., training, peer support, materials) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). By integrating these frameworks, this study seeks to provide actionable recommendations to support teachers' psychological needs and mitigate professional burnout.

2. Research Objectives

This study aimed to:

2.1 Study the key problems and obstacles (curriculum, teaching methods, resources, and assessment) currently faced by special education teachers in Yangon and Mandalay, Myanmar, following the 2021 military coup, including how these obstacles manifest across different professional backgrounds and educational settings.

2.2 Identify practical solutions and effective strategies proposed by educators to address these obstacles.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Theoretical Foundations

This study is guided by two complementary theories. First, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) posits that employee well-being is determined by the balance between Job Demands (aspects of work requiring sustained effort, such as emotional strain or lack of resources) and Job Resources (supports that help manage demands, such as training, administrative support, or peer collaboration). In the

post-coup context, teachers face soaring demands with collapsing resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Second, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) explains that optimal motivation and well-being depend on the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: Autonomy (control over one's actions), Competence (feeling skilled and effective), and Relatedness (feeling connected and supported). This study hypothesizes that the current crisis in Myanmar is systematically frustrating these needs, leading to demotivation and disengagement.

3.2 Myanmar's Special Education Context: Policy vs. Reality

Myanmar's special education system exists in a fragmented state. Before the coup, reforms under the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016–2021 aimed to promote inclusivity. However, special education largely operates outside the formal government system, often run by private centers or NGOs under the Ministry of Social Welfare. This lack of integration made the system uniquely vulnerable.

Following the 2021 coup, this fragile system effectively collapsed. Institutional decision-making stalled, and inter-ministerial collaboration broke down. The Myanmar Special Education Association (MSEA), a key provider of professional development, faced major disruptions. This has left teachers isolated and operating without access to updated training, supervision, or even basic teaching aids (UNESCO, 2022).

3.3 Systemic Gaps: Training, Curriculum, and Resources

The literature reveals profound gaps between special and general education in Myanmar. Regarding teacher training, general education teachers receive formal pre-service training, whereas there is no dedicated national training pathway for special educators. Consequently, most practitioners must rely heavily on informal learning, peer mentorship, or localized workshops provided by NGOs (Sharma, 2017). In terms of curriculum, general education strictly follows a centralized K-12 curriculum, whereas special education completely lacks any standardized national framework. This structural gap forces teachers to independently improvise or adapt general curricula without institutional guidance, heavily undermining their operational ability to meet diverse student needs.

Furthermore, a stark division exists in physical support. While general education schools receive government-issued textbooks, special education settings face extreme resource scarcity. This vacuum frequently forces teachers to exhaust personal resources to create their own materials, adding a severe burden to their daily workload and increasing emotional strain (Gomersall & Floyd, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

3.4 Synthesis, Research Gap, and Conceptual Framework

While the literature points to a systemic crisis, there is a critical lack of empirical, post-2021 data from the perspective of teachers themselves. It is unknown which specific obstacles are most severe and what practical solutions are viable in this high-demand, low-resource environment.

This study addresses this gap. It posits that high Job Demands (the post-coup crisis, institutional collapse) and low Job Resources (lack of training, materials, curriculum, peer support) lead to distinct operational challenges across the four perceived descriptive domains (Curriculum, Teaching Methods, Resources, and Assessment). This relationship is conceptually linked to teachers' frustrated psychological needs (low Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness), which ultimately informs the practitioner-driven, localized solutions this study seeks to identify.

4. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory (QUAN → qual) design to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges.

The population comprised special education teachers in Yangon and Mandalay. Due to the political instability and lack of a public sampling frame, non-probability sampling was used. A target sample of 60 teachers was recruited via purposive and snowball sampling for the quantitative survey. For the qualitative phase, 10 key informants (experienced teachers, administrators, and experts) were purposively selected to ensure a diversity of roles and experiences.

4.1 Instrument Development

Questionnaire: A structured questionnaire was developed based on the literature review and theoretical frameworks. It consisted of two parts: 1) General Information (demographics, training, school type), and 2) Key Issues, using a 5-point Likert scale to measure problems in four areas: Curriculum, Teaching Methods, Materials, and Assessment. The instrument was validated by three experts, achieving a perfect Index of Item–Objective Congruence (IOC) of 1.00 for all 20 items. A pilot test with 10 teachers established high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: An interview guide was developed to align with the SDT and JD-R models, focusing on lived experiences, emotional challenges (Job Demands), and support systems (Job Resources, Relatedness). To ensure content validity, the qualitative instrument was rigorously evaluated by two educational experts using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). All interview questions achieved an IOC score above 0.67 (ranging from 0.67 to 1.00), confirming acceptable alignment with the research

objectives and theoretical constructs. Based on the experts' feedback, minor phrasing and qualitative adaptations were implemented to ensure clarity, safety, and cultural sensitivity before field deployment. The finalized guide was systematically organized around four main analytical themes, including practical solutions.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Following ethical approval from Rangsit University's Ethics Committee, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data were collected online to ensure participant safety and anonymity given the sensitive political context. Questionnaires were distributed via Google Forms, and interviews were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet, audio-recorded, and transcribed.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to compute descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means (\$M\$), and standard deviations (\$SD\$). To interpret the severity of the operational obstacles perceived by the teachers based on the 5-point Likert scale, the calculated mean scores were systematically evaluated using the following class interval criteria derived from Best (1977):

- 4.21 – 5.00 indicates a Very High Obstacle
- 3.41 – 4.20 indicates a High Obstacle
- 2.61 – 3.40 indicates a Moderate Obstacle
- 1.81 – 2.60 indicates a Low Obstacle
- 1.00 – 1.80 indicates a Very Low Obstacle

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Open codes were inductively derived from the transcripts and subsequently grouped into broader analytical themes corresponding to the theoretical frameworks (e.g., "Frustrated Competence," "Collapsing Job Resources"). Finally, the qualitative insights were closely integrated with the descriptive statistics to explain, expand, and contextualize the specific challenges faced by the teachers within the descriptive sub-groups, fulfilling the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design without employing over-generalized inferential assumptions.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings organized to fulfill the study's research objectives. Based on the non-probability purposive and snowball sampling design, the quantitative results are interpreted strictly through descriptive parameters to analyze the specific cohort (N = 60) without expanding into generalized population assumptions.

5.1 Analysis of Perceived Operational Obstacles (Objective 1)

The demographic profiling of the surveyed educators is summarized in Table 1. The descriptive data indicated that a majority of the 60 respondents were situated in Yangon

(58.3%) and were predominantly employed within private educational settings (60.0%). Crucially, a substantial 63.3% (n = 38) of the participating special education teachers reported possessing no formal training in special education, highlighting a severe professional development gap.

Table 1 : Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 60)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
School Location	Yangon	35	58.3
	Mandalay	25	41.7
School Type	Government	12	20.0
	Private	36	60.0
	Local NGOs	12	20.0
Formal Training (in Special Ed)	Yes	22	36.7
	No	38	63.3
Teaching Experience	< 5 years	18	30.0
	5–10 years	25	41.7
	> 15 years	17	28.3

To identify and prioritize the severity of the operational challenges encountered by these teachers, descriptive item analyses were executed across the four primary pedagogical dimensions evaluated on the 5-point Likert scale (Table 2).

Table 2 : Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Perceived Obstacles (N = 60)

Problem Area (Pedagogical Dimension)	N	M	SD	Interpretation
Part 4: Teaching Materials and Resources	60	4.58	0.61	Very High Obstacle
Part 5: Measurement & Evaluation Practices	60	4.31	0.75	High Obstacle
Part 2: Curriculum Content	60	4.15	0.82	High Obstacle
Part 3: Teaching Management and Methods	60	3.90	0.95	Moderate-High Obstacle

Based on the mathematical class intervals, "Teaching Materials and Resources" represented the most critical crisis for the cohort (M = 4.58, SD = 0.61), interpreted as a "Very High Obstacle." This was followed closely by "Measurement & Evaluation Practices" (M = 4.31, SD = 0.75) and "Curriculum Content" (M = 4.15, SD = 0.82), both emerging as "High Obstacles." Classroom "Teaching Management and Methods" generated the lowest overall descriptive score (M = 3.90, SD = 0.95), representing a "Moderate-High Obstacle."

Descriptive variations across professional sub-groups provided meaningful contextual insights into the data. Regarding Teaching Management (Part 3), teachers operating without any formal training in special education experienced a noticeably higher descriptive problem score (M = 4.12, SD = 0.91) than their formally trained peers (M = 3.51, SD = 0.88). This descriptive gap indicates that the absence of specialized pre-service training leaves educators highly vulnerable to instructional management difficulties under pressure.

Furthermore, descriptive variations emerged when examining Teaching Materials and Resources (Part 4) across institutional settings. Teachers situated in Government schools reported exceptionally acute resource obstacles ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 0.23$), descriptive scores that surpassed those of private school educators ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 0.51$) and local NGO-supported centers ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.74$). This descriptive hierarchy reflects the intense breakdown of state-supported educational infrastructure within government settings in the post-coup environment, relative to alternative NGO and private networks.

5.2 Qualitative Insights and Theoretical Synthesis (Objective 2)

To contextualize the high problem scores identified in the quantitative phase, the qualitative analysis of the 10 in-depth interviews provided critical, ground-level insights. Within this crisis-affected environment, the participants explicitly rejected abstract policy ideals, focusing instead on immediate, practitioner-driven survival strategies. To satisfy the structural alignment requirements, these qualitative insights and the corresponding theoretical discussions are systematically integrated and presented across the four core pedagogical dimensions evaluated in this study:

5.2.1 Teaching Materials and Resources ($M = 4.58$)

The qualitative findings directly illuminated the quantitative crisis surrounding resource scarcity. Key informants expressed a sense of professional desperation regarding the complete lack of functional materials. To counter this "Resource Vacuum," educators strongly demanded the immediate establishment of a Centralized Digital Resource Bank. As one educational expert emphasized:

"We don't need new laws. We need a website... a shared Google Drive... where we can all upload and download lesson plans, visual aids, and simple assessment tools. Something practical." – (KI-03, Educational Expert)

From the researcher's perspective, this finding reflects a critical breakdown within the institutional ecosystem. Interpreted through the lens of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, the post-coup environment has effectively stripped away essential Job Resources while keeping emotional and operational Job Demands unsustainably high. When teachers are forced to independently reinvent basic teaching aids under political duress, professional exhaustion accelerates. The researcher notes that a grassroots digital repository functions not merely as an instructional tool, but as a vital, decentralized Job Resource that bypasses non-functional state structures to provide immediate systemic relief.

5.2.2 Measurement and Evaluation Practices ($M = 4.31$)

The severe ambiguity in tracking student progress quantified in Table 2 was characterized by informants as a state of "Teaching Blind." Without baseline assessment

standards, educators reported feeling deeply ineffective. To resolve this, participants highlighted the urgent need for simplified diagnostic indicators and peer-vetted evaluation checklists integrated within localized networks.

psychological well-being. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), optimal professional engagement requires the fulfillment of the basic psychological need for Competence—the feeling that one is capable and effective in their work. In the current Myanmar context, the absence of standardized evaluation guidelines systematically thwarts teachers' sense of Competence, leaving them feeling professionally impotent. The researcher argues that providing flexible, peer-derived assessment checklists is essential to restore this sense of professional efficacy and mitigate instructional anxiety.

5.2.3 Curriculum Content (M = 4.15)

The high problem score for curriculum content stems from the enforcement of rigid, non-adapted centralized materials that fail to match the reality of special education under crisis. To address this, the participants proposed the immediate development and deployment of Modular, Flexible Curriculum Guides. As one practitioner stated:

"Stop giving us rigid textbooks. Give us modules. 'A module on Life Skills,' 'A module on Basic Numeracy.' Let us choose what is appropriate for our students... Right now, we are just guessing." – (KI-05, Teacher, Mandalay)

This qualitative data strongly supports the necessity of autonomy in conflict-affected pedagogy. Grounded in SDT, the researcher asserts that forcing teachers to comply with outdated, centralized K-12 structures under crisis directly violates their need for Autonomy (the desire to feel ownership over one's professional decisions). By transitioning to a modular framework, administrators can restore structural Autonomy to classroom teachers. This flexibility empowers educators to dynamically customize learning pathways to suit their students' immediate cognitive and trauma-informed needs, converting a rigid constraint into an adaptive learning experience.

5.2.4 Teaching Management and Methods (M = 3.90)

Although generating the lowest relative mean score, teaching management emerged as a substantial challenge, particularly for the 63.3% of teachers operating without formal training. Informants reported experiencing profound professional isolation due to the political crisis. To combat this isolation and foster instructional stability, the establishment of Peer-to-Peer Mentorship Networks was widely proposed. One teacher shared:

"We are isolated. The government teachers don't talk to us... I wish we had a network, 'cluster meetings' where teachers from different schools can meet online... just to support each other and know we are not alone." – (KI-07, Teacher, Yangon)

The researcher emphasizes that in times of institutional collapse, horizontal, peer-led infrastructure becomes the primary driver of professional resilience. Synthesized through SDT, the current political crisis deeply fractures the need for Relatedness—the baseline human requirement to feel connected to and supported by a community. For special educators in Myanmar, professional isolation acts as a severe institutional stressor. The researcher concludes that activating decentralized "cluster meetings" or digital peer-learning circles directly fulfills this unmet need for Relatedness. This horizontal collaboration transforms isolated individuals into a collective, resilient professional community capable of sustaining special education practices from the ground up.

5.3 Macro-Level Theoretical Discussion and Synthesis

The integration of descriptive statistics and qualitative themes in this study establishes a robust empirical foundation demonstrating how severe political and political-educational crises impact special education. The empirical findings underscore that within a conflict-affected environment, macro-level institutional collapse forces micro-level survival adaptations. Grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, the "Resource Vacuum" quantified in Table 2 ($M = 4.58$) indicates that teaching materials are not merely pedagogical tools, but critical institutional Job Resources. In the post-coup environment, the complete evacuation of state funding and support leaves special education teachers to face escalating operational and emotional Job Demands without any structural buffer, exponentially accelerating professional burnout.

Furthermore, the synthesis through Self-Determination Theory (SDT) deepens the understanding of the pedagogical anxieties characterized as "Teaching Blind" across the dimensions of assessment ($M = 4.31$) and curriculum ($M = 4.15$). Professional motivation and resilience depend entirely on the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness. When special education teachers are forced to operate without standardized national frameworks, they are effectively forced to "guess" at child evaluation and independently "improvise" learning paths under trauma conditions. This systemic constraint severely erodes their sense of professional Competence, leading to high demotivation and occupational disengagement.

Crucially, the practical solutions identified by the Myanmar educators (digital resource repositories, peer networks, and modular curriculum guides) contrast sharply with traditional literature from stable educational settings, which often emphasize abstract ideals like "cultivating a positive environment." Facing a systemic institutional collapse, the practitioners in this study prioritize immediate social and material survival infrastructure. Activating decentralized, peer-led networks directly fills the chronic frustration of the need for Relatedness caused by political isolation, proving that when vertical state support collapses, horizontal professional communities of practice become the primary mechanism of educational resilience.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1 Conclusion

This study provides critical, ground-level empirical evidence regarding the severe pedagogical and operational obstacles encountered by special education teachers in Yangon and Mandalay, Myanmar, following the 2021 military coup. Analyzed through the theoretical lenses of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the findings confirm that educators are operating within an unbuffered environment defined by a systemic collapse of state support. Quantitatively, the lack of teaching materials and resources represented the most critical operational crisis ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.61$), which was descriptively most acute within government facilities ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 0.23$). This is followed closely by severe ambiguities in student measurement and evaluation ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.75$) and the complete absence of a standardized national special curriculum ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.82$). Qualitatively, these dimensions manifest as a profound "Resource Vacuum" and a state of "Teaching Blind," which systematically thwarts teachers' basic psychological needs for *Autonomy*, *Competence*, and *Relatedness*. Because top-down institutional interventions are entirely non-functional under current conditions, the study concludes that effective solutions must be immediate, horizontal, and practitioner-led.

6.2 Educational and Pedagogical Implications

The empirical findings yield critical, actionable implications for school administrators, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community leaders navigating education in conflict-affected emergencies:

1) Transition to Modular Curriculum Architecture: To alleviate the curriculum crisis, educational practitioners should bypass expectations for rigid, centralized K-12 textbook compliance. Instead, special education instruction must shift toward flexible, localized learning modules (e.g., life skills, functional numeracy). This modular framework restores structural *Autonomy* to classroom teachers, empowering them to dynamically customize learning pathways that directly match the diverse cognitive and trauma-informed needs of special-needs students under crisis.

2) Deployment of Grassroots Digital Resource Banks: To directly counter the "Resource Vacuum," administrators and civil society networks must immediately facilitate and fund peer-driven digital repositories (e.g., open-access shared folders or digital hubs). Enabling teachers to collectively share vetted, low-cost visual aids, adapted lesson plans, and simple diagnostic tools functions as a vital, decentralized *Job Resource* within the JD-R framework, successfully bypassing fractured state structures.

3) Activation of Online Communities of Practice: To mitigate profound professional isolation and professional burnout, alternative professional learning communities (PLCs) and online peer networks must be established. Activating decentralized "cluster meetings" or mobile-based peer circles directly satisfies the teachers'

frustrated psychological need for *Relatedness*. This horizontal social infrastructure provides a resilient pathway for experienced special educators to share classroom management strategies and offer immediate emotional and pedagogical mentorship to untrained peers.

6.3 Recommendations for Enhancing Special Education Teaching

Based on the empirical findings, the following practical, actionable recommendations are proposed, directly targeting the most critical needs identified by the surveyed educators:

1) For School Administrators and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):

Fund a Centralized Digital Resource Bank: Immediately prioritize the creation and funding of a simple, shared digital platform (e.g., Google Drive, dedicated website) for teachers to collectively upload and download vetted lesson plans, visual aids, and simple diagnostic instruments. This direct intervention targets the critical resource deficit ($M = 4.58$) by bypassing non-functional structures.

Sponsor Peer-to-Peer Mentorship Networks: Actively fund, facilitate, and formalize "cluster meetings" or online professional networks (utilizing secure digital platforms) to systematically combat professional isolation, satisfy the unmet need for *Relatedness*, and allow teachers to safely share emergency coping mechanisms.

2) For Educational Institutions and Teacher Training Centers:

Focus Professional Development on Tangible Tools, Not Abstract Theory: Reflecting the descriptive sub-group variations which indicated heightened challenges for untrained practitioners, future training must focus strictly on practical, tangible tools that function as immediate Job Resources. Supreme priority should be allocated to (1) individual education plan (IEP) development under crisis, (2) low-cost, localized material creation, and (3) trauma-informed classroom behavior management techniques.

Develop and Disseminate Modular Curriculum Guides: Collaboratively design and distribute flexible, modular curriculum guides (e.g., "Life Skills Modules," "Functional Numeracy Units") from which teachers can independently select. This adaptive architecture restores educators' structural Autonomy and rebuilds their eroded sense of professional Competence.

6.4 Recommendations for Further Study

Expand the Geographic and Methodological Scope: This study was structurally constrained by non-probability sampling and an exclusive urban focus on Yangon and Mandalay. Future research is urgently required in rural, remote, and directly active conflict-affected areas, where resource scarcity and structural disruptions are likely more extreme.

Incorporate Parent and Student Voices: This investigation focused strictly on the special education teacher perspective. Follow-up qualitative and mixed-methods studies

should explore the lived challenges from the complementary perspectives of students with disabilities and their immediate families to capture a holistic systemic view.

Execute Longitudinal Research Designs: This study provided a cross-sectional descriptive snapshot of a specific crisis point. A longitudinal study is highly recommended to track the long-term evolution of teacher burnout, psychological need frustration, and the sustainability of horizontal coping mechanisms as the geopolitical crisis continues in Myanmar.

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