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## From conflict to classroom: Understanding school-community-family partnerships in conflict-affect Myanmar

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how schools, communities, and families in Pekon Township, Myanmar, collaborate to sustain education amidst conflict. Being confronted with challenges including violence and displacement, Pekon township has witnessed the establishment of over 80 community schools, providing education to over 12,000 students. The study explores through interviews and group discussions uncovering strategies such as flexible learning schedules, emotional well-being support, and community-led initiatives to ensure students' educational and emotional well-being. The findings highlight the importance of resilience, adaptive learning, and local leadership in overcoming educational barriers. This research contributes valuable insights into sustaining education in conflict-affected areas, emphasizing the critical role of community involvement and innovative practices in navigating adversity.

**Keywords:** Educational Resilience, Conflict-Affected Education, School-Community Partnerships, Family Engagement in Education, Adaptive Learning Strategies, Community-Led Initiatives, Educational Continuity in Crisis, Psychosocial Support in Education.

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### 1. Introduction

In conflict-affected regions, the journey from conflict to the classroom is marked with a myriad of challenges that stand in the way of such children having access to compliant education. These include violence, forced displacement as well as political unrest and upheaval disrupting the educational landscape. This study takes an extensive investigation, with attention aimed at the complex web of relationships and partnerships forged between schools, communities, and families in Myanmar. With a specific focus on the transformative role of these collaborations in overcoming adversity, the study offers insights into a mobile education program operating in Pekon Township, located in the South Shan State of Myanmar. Here, educators have exhibited exceptional resilience, ran over 80 community schools, and provided education to more than 12,000 students according to Board of Education Pekon's Facebook page, 2023. Utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with

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teachers, community members and parents, this research seeks to unravel the dynamics of these partnerships and their contribution to the educational landscape in conflict-affected Myanmar.

## 1.1 Background

Millions of children across the world living in conflict-affected areas are facing significant challenges to accessing basic education due to displacement, violence, and political instability (Hazer & Gredebäck, 2023). The military in Myanmar staged a coup on February 1, 2021, had resulted nationwide protests on one hand and a forceful military response on the other. The cruel oppression of the military forced many civilians, especially young adults, to take up arms and lead to a worsening civil war across the country. Along with ongoing conflicts between the military and resistant armed groups, resulted in mass displacements of civilians significantly hindering students' access to education. According to (Conflict Watchlist 2024 | Myanmar: Resistance to the Military Junta Gains Momentum - ACLED, 2024), there were 8,254 political violence events in 2023. Around two million individuals, inclusive of school-age children, were forcibly displaced due to the ongoing battles, violence and insecurity as estimated by the Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar (2023). As mentioned in (UNHCR 2024 Report - Myanmar Situation), the conflict caused after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar resulted continual and extended displacement, posing significant challenges in obtaining resolutions. Around 1.35 million refugees, asylum-seekers and individuals in refugee-like circumstances are affected population. With 49% of children, there are 2.3 million internally displaced people (IDPs) according to that report. Among those IDPs, half of the demographic constituted with women and girls (UNHCR, 2024).

Myanmar, before the military coup, had made significant progresses in education with over 9.2 million students' enrollments in KG-12 education in 2019-2020 academic year. Unfortunately, only 2.3 million students could continue their education after the coup, indicating a significant decrease in enrollment (Eleven Media Myanmar, 2023). In higher education, an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 university students participated in the civil disobedience movement by rejecting to return to school (The Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar, 2023).

Against the backdrop of Myanmar's ongoing conflicts, the transformation of conflict to classroom is hindered by challenges that seriously limit children's educational access. These challenges arise from violence, forced displacement, and political instability, leading to the hostile educational environment. As millions of civilians are forcibly displaced in the aftermath of the coup and ongoing conflicts, the educational prospects are severely disrupted. As a result, As the trust in the education system under junta control decreased, some parents look for other educational options including schools and institutions of resistant armed-groups-controlled areas run by the shadow National Unity Government (NUG) (Pann, 2023). In such context, Pekon Township in the Southern Shan State of Myanmar emerged as a case study. Pekon township, a place known for its natural beauty with a large rural population, faced distinct challenges. The Covid-19 has resulted all schools shut down and it was ongoing due to the coup since parents refused to send their children to schools controlled by the junta. What worsens the education crisis is that many schoolteachers and educators participated in Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and those who did not join CDM were moved to elsewhere by the military. Despite these challenges amid the ongoing armed conflicts, a grassroots effort was emerged as Board of Education Pekon with the goal to fulfill the educational gap by working together with local leaders and communities from different villages and IDP camps.

By 2022, the Pekon Board of Education had successfully established 87 schools through the dedication of the local community and volunteers. These schools served diverse ethnic backgrounds and IDP camp residents, ensuring that education continued despite the ongoing conflicts. While the Myanmar situation remained challenging, this initiative exemplified the power of school-community-family partnerships in sustaining education during conflict, providing valuable insights into our understanding of these partnerships in Myanmar.

The ongoing conflicts and political instability in Myanmar not only disrupted children's education but also severely affected their emotions and behaviors (San, 2022). The experience of displacement and the witness of violence left long-lasting emotional wounds. In such tough situations, the role of school-community-family partnership is crucial. They help children's access to education and support their overall wellbeing and strengths (Epstein, 2010), especially in conflict-affected areas like Pekon township. Understanding the dynamics of these partnerships is valuable for planning effective

strategies to ensure students not only enroll in schools but also succeed in the face of significant challenges.

## 1.2 Research objectives

The primary objective of this research is to examine and understand the dynamics of school-community-family partnerships in the conflict-affected context of Myanmar, with a specific focus on Pekon Township following the 2021 military coup.

## 1.3 Specific objectives

1. To identify the primary challenges encountered by educators, families, and communities in Pekon Township when sustaining education during conflict, and to analyze the strategies implemented by these stakeholders to mitigate these challenges, with a focus on resource allocation, logistical barriers, and community resilience initiatives.

2. To assess the level and forms of community and family involvement in educational initiatives during the conflict in Pekon Township, examining their roles in decision-making processes, resource mobilization, and support networks, and to evaluate the impact of this involvement on educational outcomes, including student attendance, academic performance, and psychosocial well-being.

3. To analyze the innovative educational practices implemented in Pekon Township following the onset of conflict, including mobile education programs, alternative learning modalities, and community-driven initiatives, and to evaluate the effectiveness of these practices in maintaining educational continuity and promoting resilience among students, teachers, and communities.

This study significantly adds to our understanding on the role of school-community-family partnership to sustain education in conflict-affected areas after Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Its findings offer practical insights for educators, policymakers, and humanitarian organizations operating in conflict areas to strengthen educational resilience and effectiveness. Moreover, this study underscores the societal importance of collective efforts for resilience during the time of crises, encouraging global communities and educators to collaborate and innovate to overcome similar obstacles.

## 2. Methodology

The research methodology employed in this research aligns with the need to comprehensively capture the dynamics of school-community-family partnerships in conflict-affected areas, specifically. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 participants representing diverse stakeholders which include teachers, Board of Education members, parents, and community leaders or governance bodies. These interviews delve deeply into participants' experiences, perceptions, and strategies to get a detailed understanding of their roles and contributions amidst conflict. For collaborative exploration and to enable stakeholders to exchange insights, discuss challenges, and co-develop solutions, two focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 8 participants each were conducted. The FGDs ensure a diversity of viewpoints and facilitate collective comprehension of the complexities in education in the context of ongoing conflict.

The purposive sampling approach, i.e., selecting participants directly engaged in post-coup educational efforts, ensures the depth and relevance of the collected data. Thematic analysis is employed to identify patterns within the data and to enable the extraction of key themes in relation to school-community-family partnerships to understand the partnership dynamics in sustaining education in conflict setting of Myanmar, which contributes the valuable insights to the existing literature.

## 3. Ethical consideration

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. The study was granted an exemption on October 2, 2023, under IRB number 23-133. This approval confirms that the study meets ethical standards for research and was conducted according to the university's required policies.

#### 4. Literature review

Education remains a fundamental right for children, even amidst the turmoil of armed conflict (Manucehr, 2011). Its pivotal role in fostering reconciliation and peace cannot be overstated (Manucehr, 2011), as it holds the potential to shape conflict dynamics and contribute to peacebuilding efforts (Smith, 2014). However, the provision of education is profoundly impacted by armed conflict, leading to a myriad of challenges such as financial constraints, infrastructure destruction, and violence targeting educators (Smyth, 1999). These obstacles are further compounded by the formidable task of ensuring universal access to primary education in war-torn regions (Sommers, 2002). Despite these formidable obstacles, prioritizing education in humanitarian initiatives to ensure the well-being of children in conflict affected areas remains imperative (Nicolai, 2003). In addition, it has been acknowledged widely on the importance of implementing customized educational programs that meet the specific requirements of marginalized children and adolescents (Sommers, 2002).

The obstacles faced to provide education in conflict settings presents diverse challenges. Sharifian (2019) underscores the profound stress and trauma experienced by both students and teachers in conflict affected areas, significantly affecting their academic performance and overall wellbeing. Furthermore, Vega (2016) explores the challenges in ensuring educational access in non-formal environments particularly for marginalized groups encountering heightened barriers. Pherali (2016) emphasizes the adverse effects of armed conflict on school leadership, where educators and school administrators are subjected to direct violence and pressure to maintain a safe learning environment.

Furthermore, Dryden-Peterson (2011) identifies several barriers to education in conflict zones, including challenges in accessing schools, the prolonged displacement of populations, and the crucial need for accurate and comprehensive data to inform education interventions effectively. Smyth (1999) underscores the detrimental effects of conflict on educational provision, such as inadequate financial support, widespread destruction of infrastructure, and the deliberate targeting of educators. Smith (2014) underscores the minimal emphasis placed on education in conflict-affected countries, worsened by factors like poverty, child labor, and unequal access to education. Misra (2020) stresses the importance of integrating peace education into the curriculum to address conflict's root causes and promote a culture of peace. These findings collectively emphasize the immediate need for comprehensive, sustainable, and inclusive educational interventions in conflict-affected areas.

Exploring community-led schools in conflict-affected regions highlights the significant influence of violence on school leadership and emphasizes the importance of embracing inclusive practices. Pherali (2016) and Wanjiru (2019) both highlight the hurdles encountered by school leaders, including safety concerns and the imperative to mitigate conflicts. Wanjiru (2019) provides a comprehensive exploration of teacher engagement in school leadership, specifically focusing on meeting the needs of children impacted by conflict. Shah (2015) and Silwal (2016) both highlight the adverse impacts of armed conflict on education with Shah (2015) warning against oversimplifying resilience as a solution. Additionally, Shah (2019) critiques prevalent conceptualizations of resilience in the Education in Emergencies (EiE) domain suggesting potential constraints on its transformative capacity. Tol (2013) emphasizes the importance of context-specific interventions to promote resilience and mental well-being among children and adolescents affected by armed conflict.

Research emphasizes the crucial role of parents and communities in mitigating the adverse effects of armed conflicts on children (Wessells, 2017). However, the intricate socioecological factors associated with warfare can significantly impede their capacity to do so (Wessells, 2017). Children's involvement in armed conflicts, whether as combatants or victims, poses substantial barriers to peace (Wessells, 1998). In post-conflict settings, interventions aimed at families such as parenting programs, have shown potential (Jong, 2020). However, the international community urgently needs to enhance its efforts in preventing and addressing child recruitment by armed groups (O'Neil, 2018).

Research on school-community-family partnerships in conflict-affected areas emphasizes the value of shared responsibility and empowerment in fostering effective collaborations. The full-service community school model is recognized as a strategy to address diverse needs of students, families, and staff in these areas (Herrenkohl, 2019). However, challenges such as staff turnover and student mobility hinder the success of these partnerships (Herrenkohl, 2019). The attitudes and perspectives of



teachers, parents, and community organizations regarding the establishment of these partnerships underscore the necessity for a platform where their voices can be heard (Kates, 2001). In rural communities, structured interventions like Teachers and Parents as Partners (TAPP) have shown efficacy in promoting student achievement and fostering robust family-school partnerships (Sheridan, 2016).

While there is an extensive body of literature on how armed conflict impacts education, a significant gap remains in our understanding about how the partnerships mechanisms function between schools, communities, and families work in areas impacted by conflict. Many studies have looked into the challenges faced by educational systems during conflicts such as displacement, violence, and infrastructure collapse (Smyth, 1999; Dryden-Peterson, 2011). They have also explored different ways to address these challenges, such as the implementation of emergency education programs and changing or adaptation of curriculums to meet the needs of displaced populations (Sommers, 2002; Nicolai, 2003).

However, how these partnerships adapt and evolve over time in ongoing conflict situations to sustain educational access and quality is less explored. While the resilience of communities and their efforts to keep education going during crises is acknowledged (Wessells, 2017; Herrenkohl, 2019), there's not much empirical research on the dynamics of how schools, families, and community organizations collaborate in this context. Specifically, there's a lack of how these entities interact, negotiate roles, and mobilize resources collectively to meet the educational needs of students in conflict affected areas. Furthermore, existing studies tends to focus on the immediate responses to conflict without looking closely at the long-term strategies that communities employ to deal with the changing nature of conflict and its effects on education (Pherali, 2016; Shah, 2019). This oversight neglects on understanding the ongoing efforts and resilience needed to keep education going in areas of protracted conflict.

Additionally, while it is widely recognized the importance of psychosocial support for students in conflict-affected areas (Sharifian, 2019; Tol, 2013), there is limited study on how school-community-family partnerships contribute to students' emotional and psychological well-being. The role of these partnerships in providing a complete educational experience covering both learning and mental health needs in such settings remains underexamined.

This research seeks to fill these gaps by providing an in-depth exploration of the school-community-family partnerships in Pekon Township, Myanmar. It aims to reveal the strategies these partnerships employ to sustain education, identify the obstacles they encounter, and assess the impact of their efforts on the educational landscape and student well-being in conflict-affected Myanmar. By focusing on Pekon Township's unique circumstances, this study adds a nuanced understanding of the operationalization of these partnerships in sustaining education amid conflict providing valuable lessons that could guide policies and practices in comparable situations worldwide.

## 5. Theoretical framework: Resilience theory

This study is grounded in resilience theory, which offers a solid foundation for understanding how individuals, communities, and systems withstand and adapt to hardships. Originally derived from ecological studies, and later applied to psychology, social work, and education, resilience theory focuses on the capacity to bounce back from challenges through adaptation and growth (Holling, 1973; Masten, 2001). Within the context of education in conflict-affected areas, resilience theory helps explore how school-community-family partnerships contribute to sustaining education despite challenging circumstances.

In this study, resilience is conceptualized at three interconnected levels: individual, community, and systemic. At the individual level, resilience involves the capacity of students and educators to preserve or restore their emotional health and continue their educational pursuits even in the face of conflict-related dangers (Masten & Obradović, 2006). This encompasses adaptive coping mechanisms and emotional support structures that enable education to continue despite challenges.

At the community level, resilience is seen in the collective efforts of families, educators, and local leaders to establish safe learning environments, mobilize resources, and modify educational practices to address the challenges posed by conflict (Norris et al., 2008). This research focuses closely

on how these collaborative efforts embody the resilience of the community, fostering a supportive educational ecosystem that protects the educational rights of children.

Systemic resilience refers to how well the entire education system can adjust and adapt in face of conflict. This includes how policies change; curriculum adaptations and alternative education modalities are established. Being resilient at this level is crucial for ensuring the continuity and inclusiveness of education providing pathways for recognition. It helps students move smoothly into higher education or vocational training despite the disruptions of the formal system.

Resilience theory highlights the dynamic interplay between risk factors (e.g., conflict, displacement) and protective factors (e.g., community support, innovative educational practices). This research aims to identify and analyze these influences in Pekon Township, showing how protective mechanisms are mobilized to fight against the risks posed by the ongoing conflict.

By applying resilience theory, this paper seeks to enhance the understanding of how resilience operates in conflict-affected educational settings. It explores the strategies and practices that help educational stakeholders to not only survive but also prosper amidst challenges. This perspective provides a comprehensive exploration of the abilities and resources essential for the sustainability of education in Pekon Township, delivering insights that can inform policy and practice in similar situations worldwide.

## 6. Findings

In Pekon Township, despite ongoing conflict, a powerful story of resilience, innovation, and community spirit unfolds, challenging the conventional boundaries of educational delivery. This story highlights how the combined efforts of schools, communities, and families have not only kept education going but have also turned difficult situations into chances for educational improvement and empowerment. By examining teamwork, flexible learning methods, emotional support, better student involvement, solutions to challenges, and leadership from within the community, we learn about the different strategies that have allowed education to continue in areas of Myanmar affected by conflict.

### **Theme 1: Collaborative resilience and community mobilization**

In Pekon Township, situated in a region affected by conflict, there exists a powerful example of how collaboration and community effort can overcome significant obstacles to education. One of the village education committee members expressed,

*The village education committee was formed through collaboration, with members elected during a community-wide meeting. The committee comprises two village leaders, 10 ward representatives and 5 parents of students. Responsibilities were assigned accordingly: the village leaders serve as president and secretary, managing decision-making processes, organizing meetings, and leading school activities. Meanwhile, ward representatives act as treasurer and auditor, collecting funds for teachers and mothers, planning resource distribution, and coordinating school tasks.*

This effort showcases the resilience of educators, parents, and community leaders who come together to tackle the challenges of providing education during times of conflict. They have worked collectively to set up temporary classrooms in locations that are considered safer, sometimes even constructing bomb shelters close to schools to protect students and teachers. Beyond ensuring safety, the community has creatively addressed financial challenges that threaten access to education. By pooling resources and introducing modest school fees, they have demonstrated a strong commitment to maintaining educational services. One of the teachers explains that:

*Parents, school committee members, and village elders play crucial roles in various school-related activities, such as setting school fees, determining school opening and closing times, and supporting school operations financially from the village fund.*

Additionally, the community has sought support from local NGOs, civil society organizations, and donors, including contributions from migrants working abroad. As discussed during the focused group discussion, many participants discussed like-

*Monthly meetings are held consistently, emphasizing shared responsibilities and foster mutual understanding among participants. Collaborative efforts in addressing challenges are encouraged, promoting a supportive atmosphere. Tasks include assisting teachers with their livelihood,*

*organizing parent-teacher meetings, seeking individual and organizational donors, and staying informed about war-related developments.*

These actions highlight a communal approach to sustaining education, emphasizing the importance of shared responsibility and collective action in Pekon Township. This model of community-driven support and resilience serves as an essential strategy for keeping education accessible during challenging times.

However, they continue to face issues with the recognition of their education system, as the military junta do not recognize operating schools in resistant armed-group based areas. Moreover, students are prohibited from transferring to any formal schools established by the military. Furthermore, even if students successfully complete high school, neither private nor public universities accept them for higher education. This lack of recognition is a significant deterrent for students, particularly among high school students, who consequently lose motivation to attend school.

Despite receiving recognition from the National Unity Government (NUG), there remains a glaring absence of opportunities for high school graduates to pursue higher education. Although the NUG has introduced some online educational opportunities, such initiatives are impractical for areas like Pekon, where internet access is unavailable. A teacher, who serves both as an educator and on the school committee, explained this issue, stating,

*Given the lack of recognition for our education system and the absence of guaranteed opportunities for higher education, many middle and high school students lose motivation and opt to enter the workforce instead. This poses a significant concern for parents, teachers, and the community at large.*

These findings reveal that in Pekon Township, collaborative resilience and community mobilization significantly contribute to sustaining education amidst conflict. This aligns with Manuchehr (2011), who emphasized the importance of community involvement in education during times of unrest. Unlike the general analysis of Manuchehr, this study delves into the specific roles and actions of community members, such as village leaders and ward representatives, operationalize this support. This adds a nuanced understanding to the literature, underscoring the practical mechanics of resilience in action, beyond theoretical discussions.

### **Theme 2: Innovative educational practices and adaptations**

In the challenging environment of Pekon Township, marked by conflict, the local educational system has not only persevered but also innovated through a variety of educational practices and adaptations. These innovations are rooted in the community's determination to ensure that education continues against all odds. Recognizing the limitations imposed by the conflict, educators have adopted mobile education programs and alternative learning modalities to reach students who are otherwise cut off from traditional schooling.

*Since we don't have enough textbooks, we do not allow students to bring home but we let them share textbooks. In addition, we offer flexible learning schedules in collaboration with village committees, allowing students to attend classes outside regular school hours due to the challenges posed by airstrikes and conflict situations. We only have limited educational resources for students' individual interests and needs.*

This flexibility has enabled education to be more accessible and inclusive, catering to students dispersed across various locations. Moreover, there has been a notable shift towards integrating new teaching methods and curriculum adaptations, particularly by younger teachers who have stepped into roles of educational leadership. These educators, empowered by the support of the community, have introduced creative teaching approaches that utilize local stories and real-life examples to make learning more relevant and engaging for students. One of the village teachers explain;

*We use local resources with open education approach like oral history and storytelling, sharing traditional wisdom, cultural insights, and practical skills of community members such as weaving, traditional farming practices, agricultural activities, sports, and even traditional dance, enriching the educational experience.*

This approach not only enriches the educational content but also helps students connect their learning to the world around them, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of their cultural heritage and current circumstances. Occasionally, the community arranges for health workers or mobile medical teams to visit the village schools or IDP camps, offering health care and educational

sessions on health for students. In emergencies, the community collaborates with local rescue teams through the village administration committee, which is part of the township's public administration group. These innovative practices underscore the community's commitment to not just maintaining educational continuity but also enhancing the quality of education under challenging conditions. By adapting to the constraints of their environment and leveraging the unique strengths of their community, Pekon Township offers a compelling model of how resilience, innovation, and adaptability can transform educational delivery in conflict-affected areas. The innovation in educational practices observed in Pekon Township, from mobile education programs to curriculum adaptations, provides empirical evidence supporting Sommers' (2002) advocacy for customized educational programs in conflict zones. However, this study extends this narrative by detailing the grassroots innovation driven by local educators and community members, a perspective less emphasized in previous literature dominated by top-down programmatic interventions (Vega, 2016).

### **Theme 3: Psychosocial support and emotional well-being**

Amidst the chaos caused by conflict in Pekon Township, a critical component of addressing education has been focusing on providing psychological support and the emotional well-being of students. Teachers teaching in one of the internally displaced people (IDP) camps explained about the treat of weapons and attacks;

*The constant threat of heavy weapons and airstrikes greatly affects our students physically and mentally. It's tough because schools are often targeted by the military, making it hard to keep students safe. As educators, we have to reduce class time and occasionally conduct teaching at students' homes to protect them from airstrikes and overcrowding.*

Understanding the deep effects of continuous conflict on children's mental health, educators, parents, and the wider community have come together to support systems focused on these psychological challenges. This collective action ensures that the school environment go beyond a place of academic learning to become a space where students can experience emotional safety and support.

Teachers, who are often on the front lines of this psychosocial support, are equipped not just to educate but to offer informal counseling, helping students navigate the stress and trauma associated with their experiences of conflict. One teacher narrates about some students' situations;

*Many of our students are internally displaced persons (IDPs), facing several disruptions in their daily routines. These challenges range from finding stable housing to dealing with food shortages. Additionally, some students have to take on family responsibilities and work outside, which unfortunately keeps them from attending school regularly.*

Supporting approach is complemented by the establishment of peer support networks among teachers themselves, fostering a culture of mutual care and shared resilience. These networks serve as a platform for sharing strategies for emotional support, further strengthening the community's collective capacity to address psychosocial needs.

*Despite facing numerous challenges, we teachers demonstrate remarkable resilience in our roles. We provide moral support to our colleagues including parents and community members and prioritize advocating for truth and children's rights amidst the junta's oppression. We rely on each other for emotional support and continue to develop resilience. (One of the teachers, Focused Group Discussion)*

Parents and community members also play a pivotal role in reinforcing this support system outside the classroom. By providing home-based education support and through community learning groups, they ensure that learning continues in a caring and supportive setting even when access to formal schooling is disrupted. Additionally, advocacy and mobilization efforts by these stakeholders have also been key in keeping attention on the holistic needs of children, advocating for educational settings that prioritize mental health and emotional wellness. The focus on psychological support and emotional health in Pekon Township shows a comprehensive approach to education in conflict-affected areas. It acknowledges that for students to succeed academically, it is a must that their emotional and psychological needs are also met, creating a foundation of stability and support that enables learning and growth despite the challenges posed by their environment.

Consistent with Sharifian (2019), the psychosocial support mechanisms implemented in Pekon Township are vital for student well-being. This study contributes to the conversation by illustrating



specific community-driven strategies, such as teacher-led informal counseling and peer support networks, highlighting the community's agency in crafting solutions tailored to their context. This insight builds on Pherali (2016) by demonstrating how these strategies are applied in a Myanmar-specific context, thereby enriching our understanding of psychosocial support's operationalization in diverse conflict settings.

#### **Theme 4: Enhanced student engagement and participation**

In Pekon Township, facing ongoing conflict, an innovative approach, the integration of community and extracurricular activities into the educational framework, has significantly enhanced student engagement and participation. Understanding the need for holistic development and the unique challenges faced by students in conflict-affected areas, teachers and community members have worked together to offer a variety of extracurricular programs ranging from oral history sessions to traditional arts and sports. These activities essential components of the educational experience in Pekon Township. Led by community volunteers, these activities serve multiple purposes. They provide a positive way for students to express themselves, explore their interests, and develop new skills. They also keep cultural continuity and strengthen community bonds. This way of learning is really important in conflict-affected settings, where keeping cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging are vital for community resilience.

The effect of these community-led extracurricular programs on student engagement is profound. By giving students chances to learn outside the traditional classroom setting, they create a more inclusive and engaging educational environment. This can help students become active participants in their learning journey, driven not just by schoolwork but also by the enrichment these activities provide.

*As parents and community members, we set up friendly football and volleyball games between villages and IDP camps in the region. These events aim to strengthen bonds within the community and alleviate stress among children.*

This holistic model of education, which values social and emotional development alongside academic learning, is instrumental in enhancing student engagement and participation in Pekon Township, demonstrating the power of community involvement in education, particularly in settings marked by adversity. The role of extracurricular activities in enhancing student engagement, as found in Pekon Township, echoes Herrenkohl's (2019) findings on the importance of holistic education models. This research contributes to this discourse by demonstrating how these activities not only maintain educational engagement but also preserve cultural traditions and strengthen community bonds. It provides a more comprehensive view of student engagement in conflict-affected areas.

#### **Theme 5: Challenges and strategic responses**

In the context of Pekon Township, the educational landscape has been significantly challenged by the ongoing conflict. These challenges, ranging from infrastructural damage and financial constraints to the psychological impact on students and educators. In response, the community, demonstrating remarkable resilience and innovation, established makeshift classrooms in safer locations. These spaces, often equipped with basic resources and sometimes even adjacent to newly constructed bomb shelters, ensure that education can continue in a secure environment. This solution not only addresses the immediate safety concerns but also underscores the community's commitment to preserving educational access during times of crisis.

Financial constraints have also posed significant hurdles, with the economic fallout of the conflict affecting both families' ability to afford education and schools' capacity to operate. The community's response has been to adopt a model of shared financial responsibility, pooling resources and implementing modest school fees to fund educational initiatives. Furthermore, engagement with local and international NGOs has opened additional channels of support, including donations and volunteer teaching efforts, which have been crucial in overcoming financial barriers to education.

Another significant challenge has been the gap in teacher capacity, especially among volunteers with less teaching experience. To address this, Pekon Township has leveraged partnerships with NGOs and international organizations to facilitate training programs for volunteer teachers. These initiatives have not only enhanced the quality of education provided but have also reinforced the community's role in supporting education, showcasing a model of shared educational responsibility.

The collaborative environment in Pekon Township has also fostered empowering experiences for educators, with the solidarity among teachers, parents, and community members creating a supportive educational ecosystem.

*To ensure that every child succeeds academically, teachers offer after-school tutoring, while parents and the community provide essential support. (One of the student's parents)*

This collaborative spirit has been instrumental in maintaining morale and motivation among educators, further enabling them to navigate and overcome the challenges posed by the conflict.

These findings on the strategic responses to educational challenges in Pekon Township align with Smyth's (1999) observations on the impact of conflict on educational infrastructure and access. Like Smyth, we note the significant hurdles posed by infrastructural damage and financial constraints. However, our study extends these insights by showcasing the inventive solutions devised by the Pekon community, such as establishing makeshift classrooms and pooling resources. This practical approach not only addresses immediate safety concerns but also emphasizes the community's commitment to education.

### **Theme 6: Community empowerment and leadership**

In Pekon Township, amidst the backdrop of conflict, a transformative shift in educational leadership and community empowerment has emerged, fundamentally altering the traditional dynamics of educational governance and community involvement. This shift is characterized by a remarkable increase in local participation and the rise of new leaders within the educational sector, showcasing the resilience and proactive stance of the community in the face of adversity. The community's empowerment is clearly evident in the establishment and running over 80 community schools, an impressive achievement through the collective efforts of educators, parents, and local leaders.

Leadership within these educational settings has undergone a notable change, with younger teachers emerging to assume leadership roles. Empowered by the support of the community united by a common educational goal, these young leaders have brought innovative teaching methods and curricular adaptations.

*Despite the challenges, young teachers like us are taking leadership positions and actively contributing to improve education within our community. We prioritize interactive learning approaches such as group discussions and critical thinking instead of traditional rote memorization methods. We aim to cultivate a more engaging and effective learning environment for our students.*

Their leadership moves away from the old top-down structures, embracing a more collaborative and inclusive approach that values input from all stakeholders.

This shift towards empowering the community and fostering innovative leadership has facilitated the development of a nurturing and supportive educational ecosystem in Pekon Township. It has enabled the community not only to tackle the immediate problems of providing education in conflict-affected areas but also to establish the foundations for an educational system that is more resilient and adaptable. Through their collective efforts, the community has shown how local efforts can change the educational landscape. This highlights the value of empowering communities and fostering leadership from within to sustain education amidst considerable challenges.

The transformative shift in educational leadership and community empowerment observed in Pekon Township provides new insights into how education is managed in areas affected by conflict. While existing studies, such as those by Silwal (2016) and Shah (2019), have discussed the challenges to school leadership in conflict settings, the findings reveal an emergent model of grassroots leadership. Young educators, supported by the community, are at the forefront of curricular innovations and teaching methods, marking a departure from traditional hierarchical models.

## **7. Discussion**

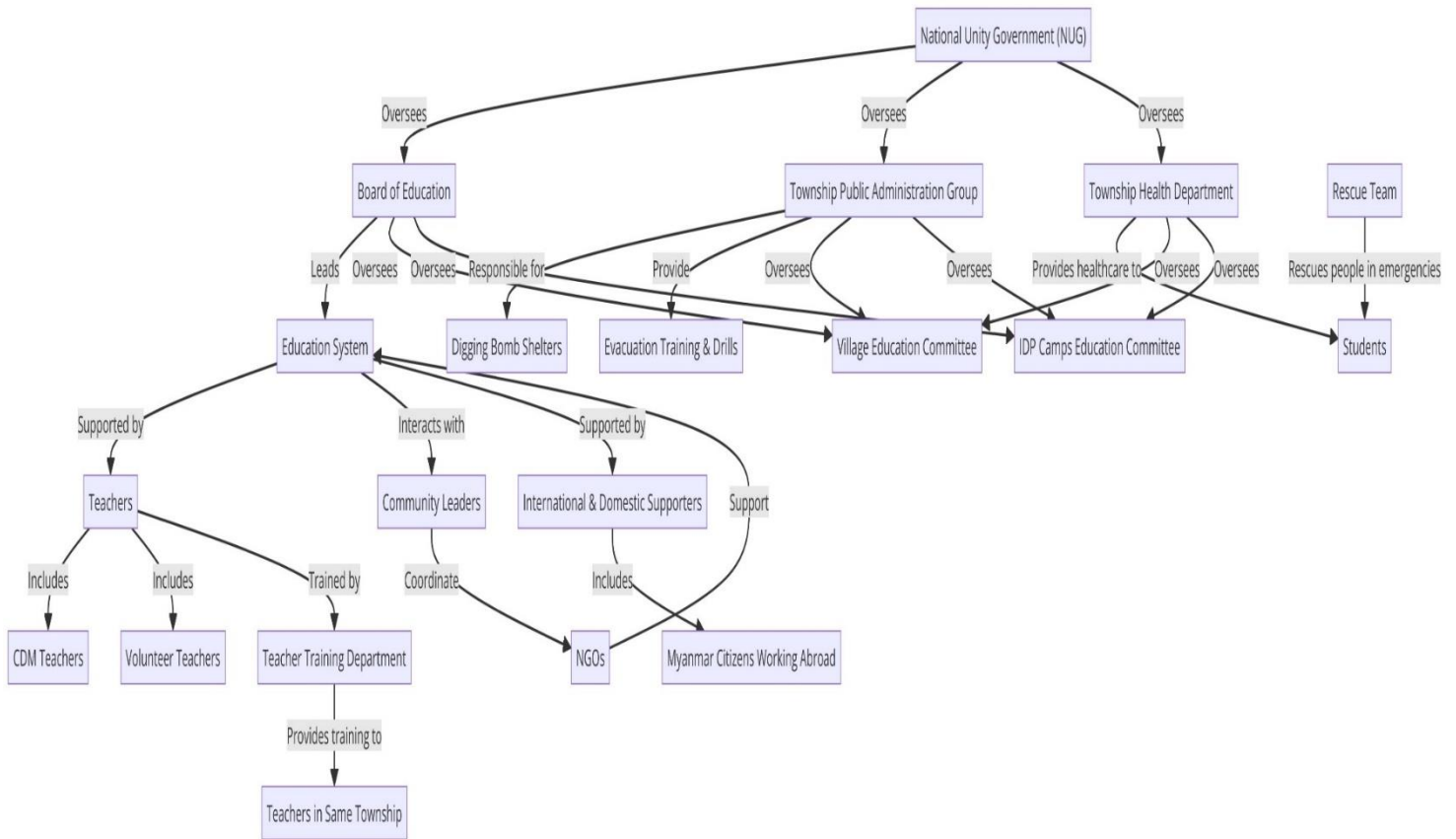
The empirical evidence from Pekon Township underscores the multifaceted nature of educational resilience in conflict-affected settings. Our findings corroborate and extend existing literature (Smith, 2014; Vega, 2016) by providing detailed accounts of how school-community-family partnerships manifest on the ground. This study's insights into the adaptive strategies and psychosocial

support mechanisms offer a deeper understanding of resilience beyond the theoretical-highlighting the localized, nuanced approaches that communities adopt in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, the study diverges from existing narratives by spotlighting the role of younger educators in leading educational innovation (Wanjiru, 2019), a relatively underexplored area in literature. This highlights a shift towards more egalitarian leadership models in education during crises, suggesting a potential area for future research and policy development.

In conclusion, while the findings align with the broader themes identified in the literature, they contribute new insights into the specific mechanisms through which resilience and educational continuity are achieved in conflict settings. These insights have significant implications for policymakers, suggesting that supporting grassroots initiatives and leveraging local knowledge and leadership can be crucial in developing effective educational interventions in similar contexts.

In addition, this research is confined to Pekon Township, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences across different conflict zones in Myanmar. Additionally, the reliance on qualitative methods, though rich in detail, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to



include a broader geographical scope and incorporate quantitative methods to validate and extend the findings. Exploring the long-term impact of the identified educational strategies and community resilience mechanisms on student outcomes would also be beneficial. Furthermore, examining the role of technology in supporting education in similar contexts could provide critical insights for enhancing educational access and quality in conflict-affected areas.

**Community Based Education Model of Pekon Township in conflict setti**

**Figure 1. Illustrative Map: Enhancing Educational Access Amid Conflict in Myanmar's Pekon Township**

Synthesis of interview and focus group findings				
Theme	Sub-theme	Challenges	Responses/Strategies	Quotes

Collaborative Resilience and Community Mobilization	Community-Driven Educational Support	Establishing education during conflict and the lack of recognition for community-run schools by official entities affect student motivation and future education prospects.	Creating temporary learning spaces and safety measures, implementing resource pooling and modest fee structures, and facilitating community-wide collaboration to support education, including financial and operational management.	<p>The village education committee was formed through collaboration, with members elected during a community-wide meeting. The committee comprises two village leaders, 10 ward representatives and 5 parents of students. Responsibilities were assigned accordingly: the village leaders serve as president and secretary, managing decision-making processes, organizing meetings, and leading school activities. Meanwhile, ward representatives act as treasurer and auditor, collecting funds for teachers and mothers, planning resource distribution, and coordinating school tasks.</p> <p>Parents, school committee members, and village elders play crucial roles in various school-related activities, such as setting school fees, determining school opening and closing times, and supporting school operations financially from the village fund. Given the lack of recognition for our education system and the absence of guaranteed opportunities for higher education, many middle and high school students lose motivation and opt to enter the workforce instead. This poses a significant concern for parents, teachers, and the community at large.</p> <p>Monthly meetings are held consistently, emphasizing shared responsibilities and foster mutual understanding among participants. Collaborative efforts in addressing challenges are encouraged, promoting a supportive atmosphere. Tasks include assisting teachers with their livelihood, organizing parent-teacher meetings, seeking individual and organizational donors, and staying informed about war-related developments.</p>
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Theme	Sub-theme	Challenges	Responses/Strategies	Quotes
Innovative Educational Practices and Adaptations	Resourcefulness and Cultural Integration in Learning	The conflict has necessitated the adoption of mobile education programs and alternative learning modalities. Limited availability of textbooks and educational resources.	Utilizing local resources and open education approaches like oral history, storytelling, and incorporating cultural insights and practical skills. Sharing textbooks and implementing flexible learning schedules to accommodate the needs of students in conflict-affected areas.	"Since we don't have enough textbooks, we do not allow students to bring home but we let them share textbooks. In addition, we offer flexible learning schedules in collaboration with village committees, allowing students to attend classes outside regular school hours due to the challenges posed by airstrikes and conflict situations. We only have limited educational resources for students' individual interests and needs." We use local resources with open education approach like oral history and storytelling, sharing traditional wisdom, cultural insights, and practical skills of community members such as weaving, traditional farming practices, agricultural activities, sports, and even traditional dance, enriching the educational experience.
Psychosocial Support and Emotional Well-being	Psychological Support in Education	The military conflict poses a risk to the physical and mental well-being of students, leading to a traumatic impact with schools frequently becoming targets.	Educators and the community offer robust emotional support and informal counseling while adapting educational methods to ensure safety, such as reducing class times or relocating teaching spaces.	"Understanding the deep effects of continuous conflict on children's mental health, educators, parents, and the wider community have come together to support systems focused on these psychological challenges." The constant threat of heavy weapons and airstrikes greatly affects our students physically and mentally. It's tough because schools are often targeted by the military, making it hard to keep students safe. As educators, we have to reduce class time and occasionally conduct teaching at students' homes to protect them from airstrikes and overcrowding. Many of our students are internally displaced persons (IDPs), facing several disruptions in their daily routines. These challenges range from finding stable housing to dealing with food shortages. Additionally, some students have to take on family responsibilities and work outside, which unfortunately keeps them from attending school regularly. Despite facing numerous challenges, we teachers demonstrate remarkable resilience in our roles. We provide moral support to our colleagues including parents and community members and prioritize advocating for truth and children's rights amidst the junta's oppression. We rely on each other for emotional support and continue to develop resilience. (One of the teachers, Focused Group Discussion)

Theme	Sub-theme	Challenges	Responses/Strategies	Quotes
Enhanced Student Engagement and Participation	Community Activities and Student Involvement	Conflict has necessitated the development of comprehensive strategies for student engagement, focusing on the whole child and encompassing both academic and emotional development.	The community has responded by integrating extracurricular activities and community events into the educational framework, fostering a sense of normalcy and providing opportunities for social and emotional growth.	As parents and community members, we set up friendly football and volleyball games between villages and IDP camps in the region. These events aim to strengthen bonds within the community and alleviate stress among children. "These activities serve multiple purposes. They provide a positive way for students to express themselves, explore their interests, and develop new skills. They also keep cultural continuity and strengthen community bonds."
Challenges and Strategic Responses	Addressing Educational Challenges	The conflict has led to infrastructural damage and financial constraints, impacting the educational infrastructure and causing psychological distress to students and educators.	In response to these challenges, the community has created makeshift classrooms in safer areas and formed partnerships with NGOs and international organizations for support. Furthermore, to address financial limitations and ensure the continuation of education, there has been a shift towards a communal financial model, which includes pooling resources and implementing modest school fees.	"Financial constraints have also posed significant hurdles... The community's response has been to adopt a model of shared financial responsibility, pooling resources and implementing modest school fees to fund educational initiatives." To ensure that every child succeeds academically, teachers offer after-school tutoring, while parents and the community provide essential support. (One of the student's parents)
Community Empowerment and Leadership	Leadership and Community Empowerment	The conflict has necessitated a shift in educational leadership and increased local participation in running over 80 community schools.	Younger teachers taking on leadership roles, prioritizing interactive learning, and fostering a nurturing educational ecosystem.	"Despite the challenges, young teachers like us are taking leadership positions and actively contributing to improve education within our community. We prioritize interactive learning approaches such as group discussions and critical thinking..."

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