



Reflections on Contextualizing the INEE Guidance Note on Teacher Wellbeing in Emergency Settings

Context: Myanmar, non-state online universities

Domain: 3, Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

From March-May, 2022, a team of Burmese university instructors, one university administrator, and two American researchers adapted the INEE Teacher Wellbeing Guidance Note to the Burmese context. This process of contextualizing a global good is essential for making that good applicable and meaningful for particular local contexts. As we undertook this work, we identified several challenges of the contextualization process as well as opportunities and strengths. In this report, we provide an overview of the challenges we have faced as well as the opportunities and lessons learned we believe this process provides. Myanmar's conceptualization process provides insights of how to utilize a bottoms-up approach to researching and contextualizing a global good offered by the INEE Guidance Note.

Overview of our contextualization process

The goal of contextualizing the INEE Teacher Wellbeing Guidance Note was to make the standards and recommendations more relevant and applicable to the Myanmar context. Due to the limited scope of the study, the contextualization process in Myanmar examined teaching and learning (Domain 3) at the tertiary level. The team included eight action researchers, instructors from a non-state university in Myanmar, 1 project director also affiliated with the non-state university in Myanmar, and 2 lead researchers affiliated with American universities. As a team, we developed comprehensive research tools, conducted focus groups and interviews, and analyzed the data to produce a contextualized version of the Teacher Wellbeing Guidance Note. The contextualization process included the following steps:

Step 1: Preparation: The lead researchers conducted research trainings on the concept of contextualization and qualitative research methods.

Step 2: Survey: The lead researchers drafted a survey and conducted a meeting with action researchers to review and revise. Once the survey draft was completed in English, the instructors translated the questions into Burmese.

Step 3: Focus groups: 4 action research teams composed of 2 action researchers held one 60-90 minute focus group discussion with instructors in their institution.

Step 4: Administration interviews: The 4 action research teams each conducted one interview with an administrator from their institution.

Step 5: Analysis: Each pair of researchers reviewed their focus group and interview conversations and identified the challenges and recommendations for teacher wellbeing.

Step 6: Write-up and review: The lead researchers drafted preliminary reports that were then reviewed, discussed, and revised by the action researchers.

Analysis of the Contextualization Process

This report provides a meta-level analysis of our contextualization process in order to highlight the strengths, challenges, weaknesses, and lessons learned of such a process. To do so, we drew from written and oral reflections written by the two lead researchers and eight action researchers. After each meeting, the lead researchers wrote detailed memos reflecting on general themes, interesting insights and possible challenges about the process of contextualizing. For example, the lead researchers reflected on what was said or not said during meetings with the action researchers. In addition, the lead researchers met with the action researchers at the end of the contextualization process to hear their experiences with engaging in this process. Action researchers were asked to reflect on and talk about their experiences with the overall project. The conversation focused on the challenges of the contextualization process as well as the benefits of and lessons learned from contextualizing teacher wellbeing in Myanmar. Based on these conversations and notes, we have identified the following strengths, challenges and weaknesses of the contextualization process.

Strengths of the contextualization process

Opportunities for emotional support

Participating in this contextualization process provided the Burmese action researchers social and emotional support. Given the security risks associated with even teaching in this online institution, most instructors did not know other instructors in the institution. While they may have seen each other's name in Zoom boxes during faculty meetings, they rarely had an opportunity to share their experiences or concerns with each other. Through the contextualization process, the instructors came to know one another and build a sense of community. One action researcher explained, *"I did not know my colleagues here before, although I heard some of them during meetings...now that we get to work together, it gives me a sense of social inclusion...it is meaningful to me."* The action researchers found great value in connecting with each other throughout this project, during our nearly weekly meetings and beyond.

Through the focus groups, the contextualization process provided an opportunity for other instructors within the institution to connect with each other and share their experiences. This was a meaningful way for instructors to receive and provide support for each other. According to one action researcher, *"participants appreciated being heard... they feel relaxed when they are participating and happy as they are just looking for that kind of opportunity to connect with each other."* The focus groups not only provided a space for connection, but it offered a unique opportunity to discuss the challenges they face as instructors and to reflect on their own wellbeing. One action researcher explained that

“before this, I thought there was no need to talk to each other” but after participating in the focus group, she explained that it had “effective healing power.” In this sense, participating in these focus groups served as a means of addressing and improving teacher wellbeing.

Providing learning and professional development for instructors

For the action researchers, participating in the contextualization process provided an opportunity to learn about and participate in a qualitative research project. As one action researcher noted, “when I heard about this project I felt like it’s a great opportunity for me to know the nature of qualitative research so I appreciate this experience.” Another instructor explained that while she learned about focus groups in her studies, she had not had a chance to run one. She said that the project “gave me a lot of knowledge and experience.”

Other action researchers appreciated the opportunity to hear different opinions and experiences during the focus groups and interviews. One action researcher explained how this experience gave her greater insight into the challenges that the administrators at the institution faced and, as a result, greater empathy for them. She explained that the administrators “give their effort as much as they can, but we learned they need experience and training, too.” Another action researcher spoke about how participating in the focus group interviews made her aware of the unique challenges that political science instructors face in teaching a subject that had been banned under the military regime. As one action researcher said, “I got to hear opinions [of others] in the interviews, and this was a great opportunity for me.” Overall, the research project provided an opportunity for instructors to broaden their understanding of the complexity different stakeholders in the institution face.

Strengthening the commitment to teacher wellbeing

The contextualization process provided an opportunity for instructors and administrators to reflect on the positive aspects of the institution as well as provide a space for instructors to open up and share their challenges and critiques. The process revealed the strengths and weaknesses of teacher wellbeing at this institution. It also instilled in the action researchers a deeper understanding of these issues and a greater commitment to addressing them. The process yielded specific recommendations for the institution and motivation among the instructors and administrator to work with the wider administration to implement those recommendations.

Challenges of the contextualization process

Understanding the concept of contextualization

While contextualization may be a common concept in the development and humanitarian sphere, the concept was foreign to many stakeholders, particularly those working on the

ground, such as teachers and school administrators. For our action researchers, understanding the idea of contextualization and the goal of this project, was one of the biggest challenges we faced. Preparatory meetings with lead researchers and action researchers revealed confusion with the word “contextualization.” One action researcher stated that *“the word contextualization is a challenge because I never heard this word before. From the very first meeting, the word contextualization was a challenge.”* As a result of this challenge, there was some confusion within the team about what a contextualized version of the guidance note would look like and, relatedly, what questions we could ask research participants that would help us contextualize the document.

Addressing the challenge:

- We devoted time in our initial meetings to discuss the idea of contextualization. The project director emphasized using the term ‘local approach’ to help understand the idea. He explained that the idea of contextualization was learning about what was happening with local people on the ground and identifying their interpretation of concepts laid out in the guidance note.
- While our ultimate goal was to contextualize the guidance note, we intentionally did not set a rigid structure of what that would look like. Instead, we let the process unfold organically and allowed the data to guide our final contextualization.

Understanding the term teacher ‘wellbeing’

The contextualization process showed how the term ‘teacher wellbeing’ is understood differently across the world. Specifically, it revealed a ‘Western’ interpretation of teacher wellbeing implicitly embedded within the INEE Teacher Wellbeing Guidance Note.

While the action researchers understood the concept of wellbeing in English, they explained that the term ‘wellbeing’ in Myanmar is likely to be associated with notions of mental health, which have negative connotations attached to them. According to one action researcher, *“we understand the meaning of wellbeing, but in the Myanmar meaning, it is about mental health or something like mental problems, so if you ask someone if they have a mental problem, it is not a good question for Myanmar society.”*

As we unpacked the cultural meaning of wellbeing in Myanmar, action researchers explained that it is culturally associated with mindfulness or a state of being peaceful with the mind and emotion. The instructors determined that ‘physical, emotional, and social satisfaction’ was an appropriate term to use, that carried the same meaning as wellbeing without the negative connotation. Another action researcher described how their team asked focus group participants how they were feeling to help them answer questions about teacher wellbeing.

This cultural understanding of wellbeing illuminated other challenges related to wellbeing that did not initially arise in our reading of the guidance note. Specifically, the teacher holds a particular role within Buddhist culture. As one action researcher explained, *“in Buddhist culture, teachers are regarded as one of the five great benefactors in one’s life, putting them in the same position as Buddha. In Burmese culture, this shows how teachers are valuable and very respected.”* While this concept gives prestige to the role of teacher, one action researcher noted how it also places unique pressure on teachers to live up to high social expectations, thus contributing to the stress of instructors. This reinforces the importance of understanding key concepts through a local, cultural lens.

The contextualization process revealed how the cultural context of Myanmar influences ideas about teacher wellbeing. Without an understanding of the negative connotation surrounding the idea of teacher wellbeing and without knowledge of the position of teachers within Myanmar culture, it would be difficult to address the INEE standards on teacher wellbeing.

Addressing the challenge:

- The team held several meetings to discuss the cultural issues associated with the term and identify a culturally appropriate term to use with other stakeholders during this contextualization process. The team decided to use the term ‘physical, emotional, and social wellbeing’ as a culturally-appropriate and meaningful term that conveyed the same sentiment as ‘wellbeing.’
- In our [survey](#), we asked teachers what qualities they associated with physical, emotional and/or social satisfaction of teachers, listing out various characteristics. This helped us to operationalize teacher wellbeing and better understand the ways that instructors understood and experienced wellbeing.
- The cultural position of teachers in society did not arise until the end of our contextualization process. Had it arisen earlier, it would have been productive to discuss this and figure out where it could fit into the teacher wellbeing framework outlined by the guidance note

Ethical dilemma: Discussing teacher wellbeing without addressing teacher wellbeing

One challenge felt acutely by the lead researchers was the tension of discussing the challenges of teacher wellbeing and ways to address them without actually taking action to implement changes and support teacher wellbeing. Instructors were expected to discuss the concept of wellbeing with no plans to address the material realities that contribute to the deterioration of their wellbeing. In many ways, this felt like an ethical dilemma embedded within the contextualization process and should be reflected upon by those creating a global

good as well as those who undertake the work of contextualizing it. As we neared the end of the contextualization process, the action researchers asked in confusion what would come of these recommendations and the lead researchers had to explain their limited power to make any difference, despite the work that had been taken. This tension must be kept in mind as others work to contextualize a global good—contextualization means nothing without partners and plans for implementation.

Maintaining security of researchers and participants

The process of contextualization required a qualitative research approach using focus groups and interviews. In all qualitative research, researchers must be mindful of confidentiality and associated risks for participants, but in emergency settings, this risk may be heightened. In implementing a contextualization process, flexibility and adaptability, even at the individual-level, are strategically important for the safety of all stakeholders.

Overcoming the challenge

During preparatory meetings, we held discussions about security risks associated with participating in the study, for both the researchers and the participants.

- For focus group participants: There was a clear consensus amongst action researchers that focus group participants would not be required to turn on their cameras, nor would they have to use their real names. This would protect their anonymity.
- For action researchers: There was debate about whether action researchers should turn their cameras on during the focus groups. In order for participants to feel welcomed, action researchers believed it would be best for them to turn their cameras on; however, doing this would reveal their identities and could put their own safety at risk. Ultimately, there was no consensus around whether or not action researchers conducting the focus groups should turn on their cameras and the decision was left up to each individual.

Considering the relationship between education and the state

Generally, from a 'western' perspective, education is seen as an apparatus of the state. As a result, many global goods—including the INEE Teacher Wellbeing Guidance Note—are founded on the assumption that education is provided by the state. Yet, this assumption is complicated in many fragile/failed states, such as Myanmar. In Myanmar, as is the case in other fragile/failed states, both the military government and the resistance government provide educational services. As a form of protest against the military government, many

people in Myanmar have refused public services; in the case of education, many teachers have refused to teach in the public sector and many students have stopped attending public schools. Additionally, educators seek to disable the military government by moving services such as education to non-state spaces. A shadow government has been established that provides many of the same services, including education.

The complexity of having two competing government structures impacted how to frame research questions about educational services and support for wellbeing at the national level. For example, when drafting the survey, we wanted to gain an understanding from respondents of what a teacher might need from their government to support wellbeing. Yet, this raised questions about which government this referred to and, relatedly, what they could realistically expect from the military and/or resistance government.

While most, if not all, participants rejected the military government, they still had to accept the reality of the military's control over the public education system and navigate it in various ways. It was challenging for action researchers and participants to discuss supports for teacher wellbeing without also having political conversations about what type of government should be involved and how. Individual opinions of who should provide educational services varied widely and, from the start of the process, this should have been acknowledged and addressed.

Overcoming this challenge:

- Given our time constraints, we opted to remove most discussions about support for wellbeing at the national level in order to minimize these discussions.

Weaknesses of the contextualization process

Limited scope of the contextualization process

Due to time and resource constraints of the project, the contextualization process included instructors and administrators from one higher education institution only. This institution is a non-state institution and its courses are taught online. Through our focus groups and interviews, we collected information relevant to this institution. After a team discussion, we decided that the contextualized guidance note likely applies to other similar institutions, but it may not extend to state-run institutions of higher education or institutions with in-person teaching and learning.

Limited time and resources of researchers

Engaging in a thorough contextualization process can take significant time and effort. Given our limited budget and multiple time constraints, we sought to minimize the process. We did so by dividing our team of action researchers, such that each pair of researchers focused on one standard within the domain of teaching and learning. We also minimized the number of focus groups and interviews each team conducted. While we are confident in our final contextualized document, we may have learned more about teacher wellbeing and further contextualized the guidance note with greater participation. Similarly, with additional time and resources, we may have been able to expand the scope of the study to hear from stakeholders in other institutions.

Constraints of participants

We sought to include six participants in each focus group. However, due to a range of time constraints of participants, including professional and family commitments, it was difficult to schedule meeting times where all six participants could attend. Many of the focus groups had only two to four participants. In some instances, action researchers were able to reach other participants in a one-on-one capacity or send the questions over text message.

A second constraint was the frequent power outages and weak internet connections in the country. This meant that some instructors who agreed to participate in focus groups were unable to attend at the time of the meeting, or they were able to attend, but internet connection was too weak for them to fully participate.

Lessons Learned and Conclusion

Contextualizing the Teacher Wellbeing Guidance Note for the context of Myanmar was a multi-step process that resulted in a set of recommendations to improve the wellbeing of instructors in non-state, online higher education in Myanmar. The process revealed important opportunities for future contextualization as well as challenges and weaknesses that must be addressed. Lessons learned from this process include:

1. Involving grassroots stakeholders such as teachers and school administrators in the contextualization process offers unique opportunities to hear new voices in the humanitarian sector. Yet, doing so also requires clarification around the meaning of contextualization itself as well as key terms in the global good being adapted.
2. Paying attention to local meanings of key terms and concepts can reveal gaps in the global good which are important to consider and address in the contextualized version.
3. The process of contextualizing the Teacher Wellbeing Guidance Note served as a meaningful opportunity for teachers to reflect upon wellbeing, build valuable professional knowledge and skills, and actually improve their own wellbeing.

4. Global goods are written with a set of assumptions about the relationship between the state and education. In emergency settings including fragile and failed states, these assumptions must be interrogated and accounted for in the contextualization process and final contextualized documents.

We believe that the opportunities, weaknesses and lessons learned from this project are beneficial for INEE and other development organizations who want to understand how to contextualize a global good.