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Key note speech
Enhancing teaching practices for primary education by child centered approach

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It is great honor for me to address to you this morning as a keynote speaker for this important occasion, jointly organized by Project for Strengthening the Child Centered Approach (Phase 2) and Pyinnya Tazaung Association. I have been working with the Project as a short term expert dispatched by JICA. This is my forth opportunity to come to Yangon. Before I started to come to Myanmar, I hosted a group of six dedicated educators from this project in Japan for one month in 2004. It was at Iwate Prefectural University, where I belonged. I still remember heated discussion about how to create a revised chapter on motivation, to be added to the textbook of teacher colleges. I have made many great friends since then, and delighted to be back to Myanmar.

Today I will talk about why we need child center approach (CCA) in primary education in Myanmar. It has been the main focus of the project for many years, and the project has been successful in suggesting changes as to how lessons in primary classrooms should be, and can be, conducted to put the main focus on children. I am very happy to be informed that more than 50,000 primary school teachers have been participated in CCA training and become certified CCA teachers. I am also very happy that the Government of Myanmar has decided to continue CCA to be fully implemented after the JICA project will be finished in December 2011. I am very, very, happy and congratulate you for the success of the project, and for the future of the CCA in this country.

So, let me play a devil's advocate to challenge you why we need more CCA in Myanmar. We understand that primary education in Myanmar has been successfully conducted until now, even without CCA. The project has trained more than 50,000 primary teachers, but it is still less than 30% of all the primary teachers in this country. The

teachers with no CCA training yet are doing fine at their schools. You may want to ask, then, why do we need to introduce CCA in all primary schools throughout Myanmar? Why does CCA need to be introduced to all of the primary schools in Myanmar to change traditional approach of the primary education to CCA? If primary education works fine now, why do we need to change?

Well, I must confess that I like CCA very much. I like to see children in CCA classrooms more than the children in traditional classrooms, because they look happier with CCA than without CCA. I like teachers conducting CCA lessons more than teachers of traditional lessons, because the CCA teachers seem happier to see happier faces of children than traditional teachers. I hope that all teachers in primary schools will have their opportunity to know more about CCA soon. In fact, I believe that teachers at ALL levels of schooling, not only at primary level, but also at secondary and even teachers' college level, should be familiar with CCA.

So, I will try to convince you that CCA is the necessary change in primary education of this country. Even without CCA, children of Myanmar would be still healthy, active, in good spirit, respect teachers, and become good people of Myanmar. However, if you are successful in implementing CCA in all of the primary schools throughout Myanmar, children of Myanmar would become healthier, more active, in better spirit, respect teachers more than ever, and will become good citizen of Myanmar, and good citizen of the world. I will explain why I believe this is true in three points. I hope you all agree with me.

First point is that Child centered approach (CCA) has been the major trends in education throughout the world. CCA has been discussed in many countries as the key concept for educational reforms. Almost all countries, if not all of the countries, is now trying to implement the concept of CCA in the schools in various formats. It was the key concept for the Millennium Declaration adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2000 (<http://www.unicef.org/dprk/ccd.pdf>). UNESCO asked all countries to devote at least 20% of their national budget to improve the living conditions and education of the children. UNESCO asked all of the donating countries to allocate at least 20% of their official development aids to the project related to the goodness of children in developing countries. Therefore, this CCA project has started with a good alignment to the world trends that we need to focus on the children.

When I read the book "How people learn," it gave me a strong insight to the direction of educational reform that was needed. This book "How people learn" was written by a group of leading researchers in the field of education and psychology, who were called upon by the National Research Council in the United States. The aim was to bring academic results to the classroom practices so that the educational methods would reflect upon what we know about "how people learn." The first edition was published in 1999, and in 2000, an extended version was published with a subtitle "How people learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School." The Extended version is written by Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, and edited by very well known researchers: John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking. This book has been read by many people who are involved in both research and practices of education, and made a big impact throughout the world. The extended version has 327 pages, and is available free of charge on the Web, http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=9853#toc (You can purchase a PAPERBACK for \$24.95, but free if you read it online).

In the book "How people learn," four principles of educational practices were proposed for the future of classroom teaching; learner centered, knowledge centered, assessment centered, and community centered. The four principles of educational practices are exactly matched with the main concepts of the CCA project. The first one "learner centered" is the most important concept of CCA; they used the word "learner" to represent not only children in primary schools, but also learners at all level of school education, but the concept is the same. They put the first emphasis of educational reform to be on child-centered approach.

So, what is learner centered education? Let me quote from the book. The book says the followings:

1. Schools and classrooms must be learner centered. Teachers must pay close attention to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that learners bring into the classroom. This includes a broader understanding of the learner. Research shows that students who think that intelligence is a fixed entity are more likely to be performance oriented than learning oriented. They want to look good rather than risk making mistakes while learning. These students are especially likely to bail out when tasks become difficult. In contrast, students who think that intelligence is malleable are more willing to struggle with challenging tasks; they are more comfortable with risk.

If children are in CCA classrooms for a long time, they will become learning oriented,

rather than performance oriented. This is to say that the children will become not afraid of making mistakes, engage in risk-taking activities, and will not mind to try and making errors. This is good because humans learn by trying out and making mistakes, rather than sitting quietly and trying to remember what the teacher said. Children must feel that it is okay to express themselves in the classrooms; it is okay to make mistakes, because it is just the way we learn. They should be convinced that nobody will do it perfect from the first try-out. It is okay to make mistakes. This is the key message that CCA is trying to convey to the children in activity-based lessons.

The book “How we learn” makes the second point as follows. Let me quote again:

2. Teachers in learner-centered classrooms also pay close attention to the individual progress of each student and devise tasks that are appropriate. Learner-centered teachers present students with “just manageable difficulties;” that is, challenging enough to maintain engagement, but not so difficult as to lead to discouragement. They must therefore have an understanding of their students’ knowledge, skill levels, and interests.

The keyword here is “just manageable difficulties.” It is easy to say “just manageable difficulties,” but it is much more difficult to make it a reality in classrooms. “Not so difficult as to lead to discouragement” but “challenging enough to maintain (students’) engagement.” It is a very delicate balance between not too difficult, but not too boring. The book says that teachers in learner-centered classroom should be able to balance between not too difficult and not too boring levels. Teachers’ guide provides model lessons to accomplish this “just manageable difficulties,” but we can imagine all classrooms are different. Teachers cannot become robots just to follow the teachers’ guide, but to watch children very carefully to adjust lessons in teachers’ guides to the exact needs of their students. Teachers’ guides are not the goal of CCA. It is just a starting point of good CCA lessons. Teachers will play an important role, and it is the goal of teacher training to make them ready to be CCA teachers.

The second point I would like to make is that CCA has been effective as primary teaching method throughout the world, when it is implemented successfully. CCA brings more knowledge, more skills, and more understanding to children, because the children think actively, and they use their mind in learning activities. The more the children actively involved in the classes, the more they learn. They acquire basic knowledge through discussion, projects, and experiments, because those activities

would require the students to apply their knowledge.

CCA provides opportunities for all the children concrete and meaningful chances to utilize their knowledge. Repeating what is written in the textbook can be a good education for smart children. The bright children learn quickly from any kinds of education, because they are very smart. The slower children may suffer, however. The materials may be too difficult to comprehend for them. They may be bored because they cannot see how the things in the textbook would be related to their everyday life. CCA makes all the children involved in activities by making classes easier to understand, fun to participate, and engaging in activities. So, it is a strong approach to be beneficial for all the children. It is especially effective to make the bottom up, in order to leave nobody behind. CCA is for all of the children, particularly those who need more help.

It is very important for primary education that children in the classroom are motivated in learning. It must be fun for children to be effective. Teaching methods like group discussion, experiments, creative projects are engaging activities that all children like very much. If they like the activities in the class, they will concentrate on what they are engaging in. If they can concentrate in classroom activities, they will have more time on task, which means more time for learning. If on the other hands the classroom teaching is boring, the children will lose interest. They may look serious, but their mind can be somewhere else, thinking totally different things. If they will lose their interest, they will drop out from classroom activities. Then they will lose opportunities for learning. Thus, keeping children motivated is critical for giving them chance to learn. Giving them continuing chance to learn is critical for their education. Having fun in itself is not enough for providing good education. However, having fun is critical condition for learning to occur in the classroom of primary schools. It is too much to ask younger children to sit still for long time and keep listening what teacher would say. Active involvement is therefore critical for effective education.

The following are some statements of why student-centered learning should be integrated into the curriculum. In other words, if CCA is implemented properly, it brings to the classroom the following impact in primary education. The effects include the followings:

- Strengthens student motivation
- Promotes peer communication
- Reduces disruptive behaviour

- Builds student-teacher relationships
- Promotes discovery/active learning
- Responsibility for one's own learning

Ref: Student-centred learning (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Student-centred_learning)

The third point I would like to make is that CCA will have positive effects to all aspects of education. It is not limited to the way children learn in the classroom. It would have related impact to all elements of education, including better curriculum, better assessment, better materials, better teacher training, better school administration, and better learning environment for schools. In other words, CCA brings benefit to children, but not only for the children, but also for teachers, principles, and school administrators as well. CCA is a strong concept to have impact to the entire system of Myanmar education. CCA brings happiness to all those who involve CCA, if it is implemented nationwide in a systematic manner. Support from the government with all related organization's involvement is the key to success for CCA.

When you plan for the success of total implementation of CCA, you must prepare for all aspects of primary education to be shifted in support of CCA. Through this CCA project, we now have 'Teachers' Guides for selected subjects that include concrete lesson plans based on CCA concept. We also have teacher training program to bring about the necessary change to the classroom instruction. Both Teachers' guides and the teacher training program have been designed, created, and formatively tested in the project. So, we know that they work and produce good results in support of CCA. We also have concrete materials for selected important topics, including in-service teacher education curriculum, assessment and evaluation of student learning, and how to conduct lesson studies within each school and cluster meetings. As the fruits from the successful project, we have created a comprehensive set of important components that are needed for wider implementation of CCA in the future. They are ready to go for total implementation of CCA covering all the primary schools in Myanmar.

Whenever any country tried to reform educational practices, classroom teachers have the final and strongest impact for the success of the reform. We have a saying that even if there is a strong storm outside of classroom door, inside the classroom is protected by the continuing traditions of teaching. In other words, no matter how we tried to change educational practices, the final key player is the teacher in the classroom. If she or he

will refuse to implement any change and keep following the traditional approach, any educational reform will fail and not successful. Teachers are the final gatekeepers of any new ideas to the classrooms. It is a good aspect that teachers have strong influences if you want to protect traditional ways of education. However, it may react negatively when we would like to change what has been going on in the classrooms.

So, first of all, it is very critical to have very concrete guide for teachers. We have developed teachers' guide, which is easy to use, very practical, concrete and valid. We have established how to make teachers familiar with CCA through the teacher training program. We have three stages of teacher training starting from master, to cluster, and primary teacher training. We have a set of concrete and steady manuals for teacher training programs to assure quality of the training. We have tested the manuals for teacher training, revised them to make sure all that the classroom teachers will be able to have adequate and accurate training when they are given the opportunity to participate in the training. Now, within the 64 target townships of the project, we have concrete teachers' guides and trained teachers. The project has trained more than 50,000 primary teachers within the past three years. We are ready to implement CCA, and the project has already produced good results when it is implemented in the selected schools. This is one of the most successful projects that I have ever seen in the area of educational reforms, in terms of magnitude of impact and quality prepared for the further expansion.

Now we have so much of accomplishment. However, we have so many more challenges and opportunities in the future, if we want the benefit of CCA to be delivered to all children in Myanmar in a sustainable manner. I wish what we have accomplished will not die in the future. I wish CCA will continue to have bigger impact in the future to bring about happier children throughout the countries. I wish by wider implementation of CCA, not only children but also teachers, school administrators, and teacher trainers will be happier by seeing happier faces of children in Myanmar. I conclude my keynote by saying thanks to those who involved in this project to bring about this big accomplishment, and by asking your continuing involvement to bring about bigger success for the happiness of more children and more teachers. I know you can do it and let's make today's seminar a confirmation opportunity to celebrate what has been accomplished, as well as good starting opportunity for the better future. I hope you have convinced by now that you need to do something to help CCA grow in this country.

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