

Research Article

Themhorchan Shadang

Learning in Uncertainty: A Phenomenological Study of Schooling Amid Conflict in Manipur, India

Abstract

This paper examines the lived experiences of schooling in Imphal, Manipur, a region marked by persistent conflicts where learning continuity is frequently disrupted. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten university students from the Naga, Meitei, and Kuki-Chin communities, all of whom completed their schooling in Imphal, Manipur, providing ethnically diverse perspectives on these experiences. Thematic analysis revealed that increased exposure to conflict situations led to impaired memories of schooling experiences, persistent challenges with conceptual understanding, increased socio-emotional insecurity, and a shift in perception from school-based learning toward alternative learning strategies to compensate for disrupted schooling. Findings from this localised study underscore the need for context-sensitive policies and reforms to effectively address learning gaps and strengthen lifelong learning and education.

Keywords: School experiences, social learning, conflict studies, phenomenological qualitative research, Manipur

Introduction

Conflict brings a range of restrictions and constraints on students due to the kind of environment it creates, limiting opportunities to actively learn and participate in academic and social settings. Manipur has witnessed numerous conflicts in recent times arising from social and ethnic hostilities, territorial disputes, and conflicting political regimes that facilitate violent politics, resulting in public disruption. The complex and interrelated relationships among the major ethnic communities of Manipur, primarily the Naga, Meitei, and Kuki, marked by distinct socio-cultural practices varying religious, regional, ethnic, and political identities, led Oinam (2003) to describe the state as being viewed as a “miniature Indian state” (pp. 2031). However, in times of disharmony, these differences are difficult to circumvent and often become flashpoints for conflict. As a result, Manipur has seen peaceful resistance turning

violent, with public unrest and riots causing mayhem, where school students often become a primary target to meet social demands (Singha, 2013; Rai, 2018). Therefore, there is an increasing need for examining the learning and academic growth of students immersed in conflict, to understand the space provided for students to socially engage meaningfully, allowing learning to occur for their overall development in order to realise their potential.

Dewey (1963) viewed education as a continuous process, theorising on having a meaningful experience of education through active engagement, participation and social collaboration as essential for holistic learning development. The element of social interaction is embedded in the experiential learning theory of Dewey (1963) where students are required to actively participate in a collaborative setting. It is also evident in Freire's (1970) dialogic process of interaction and in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding, where a more knowledgeable individual supports a learner within the "zone of proximal development," an important social learning strategy in a child's cognitive and social development. Wenger (1998, 2009) on the other hand, opines that learning is a social phenomenon which takes place when one actively participates in a social interaction, emphasising the importance of social community with shared interests which he described as a "community of practice," to be responsible for shaping one's knowledge and intellectual advancements. The idea of social learning thus remains an important perspective of this paper which will be discussed later.

The 2011 Census records the literacy rate of Manipur at 76.94%, whereas India as a whole had a literacy rate of about 73% for persons aged 7 years and above (Government of India [GoI], 2026). The statistics of school education 2010 - 2011, reported by the erstwhile Ministry of Human Resource Development (now Ministry of Education), show that there were 761 high and secondary schools and 123 intermediate or senior secondary schools in Manipur, including government, private aided, and private unaided schools. Of these, 350 private schools, including both high school as well as high schools with senior secondary schools, are located in Imphal that are affiliated with the state board, the Council of Higher Secondary Education Manipur (COHSEM), while six senior secondary schools are affiliated with the Central Board of Education (GoI, 2012). Despite the frequent manifestation of conflict in Manipur, research indicated that the gross enrolment ratio in education and literacy rate remained undisturbed by conflicts, mainly because of the introduction of English education in hilly regions and the increasing educational aspirations of the people in the valleys, when examined between two decades: 1991-2000 and 2001-2010 (Singha, 2013). However, estimates based on quantitative

data alone may potentially ignore the voices of those who experienced conflicts firsthand, which this paper aims to highlight. Another study argued that the Manipur government's attempt to improve the educational sector remained limited to building constructions, teacher recruitment, and postings (Singh, 2011). A study to understand the well-being of students remained extremely understudied. Coming from the state of Manipur and having witnessed conflicts of varying intensity and violent crises during my past schooling experiences, this paper allows me to engage closely with the epistemic dimensions of learning in the context of conflict, particularly in relation to contemporary experiences. Guided by experiential learning theories (Dewey, 1963; Rogers, 1969) and the psychosocial understanding of the self and lived experiences (Erikson, 1950), this paper examines learning experiences unfolding in the context of conflict by revisiting schooling memories of individuals who have witnessed turbulent times, social unrest, and crisis, a silent plight that would otherwise remain unexplored. Notably, this study was undertaken before the outbreak of ethnic violence of May 3, 2023¹ that has caused severe and unprecedented disruptions in the state.

Conflicts and Socio-Political Instability in Manipur

Conflict can be described as unresolved competition, contestation, tension, and dispute, that manifests between two competing social forces due to incompatibility or differences in goals or objectives (Dahrendorf, 1959). Boulding (2018) discusses that not all competition results in conflict except when one party gains at the expense of another. Others understood conflict as distinct from competition but considered having incompatibility of goals as an antecedent to conflict (Schmidt & Kochan, 1972; Boulding, 2018). While Galtung (2007) opined that conflict was a result of “blocked goals,” a situation where individuals or groups are unable to achieve what they seek, which occurs when there is incompatibility between the goals of two or more contending parties, leading to contradiction. According to his framework, this brewing contradiction shapes individuals’ or groups’ attitudes and behaviours and, when left unattended, results in conflict.

Historically, the genesis of documented conflict in Manipur can be traced to the British invasion (1819-1825), which was subsequently followed by the British political expansion that consolidated its administrative control by 1891 (Khangchian, 2019). The key contributing factors, as identified by Khangchian (2019), were the oppressive “colonial economic and

¹The Meitei-Kuki ethnic conflict of Manipur. For more details, see Das (2023).

administrative policies” prevalent in the valley and exercised by the elite few who colluded with the British political agents, causing tension among the local people. On the other hand, was the administrative division imposed by the British between the hill and valley regions, which laid the foundation for enduring inter-community discord. Kipgen (2013) traced its roots to ethnic and territorial disputes between different communities and showed how having such conflicts could result in identity-based conflict, while Khangchian (2019) attributed the inequality and inequitable distribution of land or administrative resources² within the state as contributing factors to the persistence of conflict. By the mid-20th century, the imposition of AFSPA, 1958 or Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (1958), as emergency measures for countering insurgencies prevailing in the northeastern regions of India, became a major factor that contributed to civil disharmony in Manipur (Haji, 2012). The ongoing issues of insurgency and the increasing number of factional groups have also led to armed conflict, while militarisation through the AFSPA, 1958, continues to impact society. Because of these reasons, the hill areas in Manipur remain under the shadow of “disturbed area” status today, whereas regions in the valleys, where most public unrest is concentrated, have been lifted from this designation (The Hindu Bureau, 2025), revealing a case of deeply embedded internal regional bias. By the late 20th century, the Naga-Kuki conflict (1992-1997) (Butalia, 2008) in the 1990s emerged as one of the major incidents in the conflict history of Manipur. While these conflicts have existed historically, their sensitive nature has had a profound and enduring impact on the collective consciousness of both younger and older generations.

Within the multiple contexts, conflicts also intensified due to numerous encounters, many of which were deemed fake by the communities. The social unrest related to the death of Sanjit and Rabina in a “fake encounter”³ with a police constable was one example that brought the state to a standstill in 2009 (Singh, 2017). The civil conflict was followed by a political one like the Mao-Gate incident⁴ in 2010 that claimed the lives of two 19-year-old Naga students,

² Section 158 of the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reform Act, 1960 protects land occupied by Scheduled Tribes. The non-tribal community in the valley considered it as disproportionate land distribution, as it covers 90% of the geographical area. The discontentment among hill tribal groups over non-tribal people’s political control in the state legislative assembly, claiming 40 seats out of 60, and concentration of major developments predominantly within the valley region, further exacerbated the brewing tensions between tribals in the hills and the non-tribal people in the valley (Butalia, 2008).

³ Sunil (2017).

⁴ The news about the arrival of the NSCN IM leader T. Muivah at his ancestral place in Ukhrul, Manipur, caused tensions in the state. Clashes broke out between the Manipur Rifles personnel and

Nili Chakho and Dikho Loshuo. Then again in 2015, the demand to implement Inner Line Permit or ILP⁵ caused disruption for months, during which schools and institutions remained closed for a long period (Chen, 2015). This particular case was mentioned by many of the students interviewed in this study, recalling the death of a class XI government school student, the late Sapam Robinhood⁶, during a protest. The protest against the implementation of 3 bills in Manipur⁷ claimed nine unarmed civilian lives including an 11-year-old boy in September of 2015, with protests continuing for months (Imphal Times, 2015). Based on the interpretations of conflict discussed above, Manipur's conflicts can be understood as an expression of disagreement or contention over beliefs, ideologies, and goals embedded within the broader vision of safeguarding the rights of the Naga, Kuki, and the Meitei communities, respectively. These conflicts arise out of communal differences; social and civil concerns; political and economic consciousness; and the pursuit of territorial and administrative control by respective ethnic communities. It is important to note that conflicts are often interrelated or superimposed upon pre-existing tensions, sometimes overlapping with one another, thereby revealing the complex, layered nature and multiplicity of conflict dynamics in the region.

Global Perspectives on Conflict and Education

Conflict can bring various incidents to the lives of people. These incidents involving armed violence, torture, destruction to property, threats, abduction and molestation in a military zone are explored by Abu-Zahra and Kay (2013), who argue that mobility restrictions due to conflict limited the access to educational opportunities, resulting in early migration, decreased student enrolment in schools, and potential decline in educational outcomes. Rai (2018) analysed the linkage between conflicts and education in Nepal, providing a complex understanding of the relation between conflict and education by glancing through the lens of politics, ideological differences, economy, identity, gender, and quality of education, while highlighting the rising issue of child soldiers, sex slaves, and violation of human rights. Though most studies address conflict as some form of barrier to education, Davies (2004), on the other hand, posited that being schooled or “educated” did not necessarily lead to peace either, further asserting that an

Naga people at Mao Gate junction, who were preparing to welcome his arrival, claiming three students' lives in the firing (Rahman, 2010).

⁵ Garg (2016).

⁶ Laithangbam (2015).

⁷ Dasgupta (2016).

educated one could also instigate and participate in violence, thus revealing the intricate relationship between education and conflict in both the global and local settings.

Studies have shown that exposure to intensified conflict causes learning gaps in students, exacerbates teacher and student absenteeism, promotes temporary migration to safer locations, and leads to school closure, factors that are negatively linked to academic achievement (Brück, Di Maio, & Miaari, 2019; Galindo-Silva & Tchuente, 2023). Others found no significant impact of family exposure to conflict on students' cognitive outcomes when intelligence quotient (IQ) was assessed in Palestinian students in the West Bank whose families were exposed to conflict, using reading skills and mathematical performance as learning indicators (Jürges, Stella, Hallaq, & Schwarz, 2022). The result, rather, indicated a negative link to non-cognitive factors, primarily the personality and behavioural components. The personality component was measured by lack of *conscientiousness*, and behavioural problems were indicated by externalising aggressive behaviour, defiance, and inattentiveness in students, all of which negatively impacted their educational attainment and other future labour outcomes. Avruch and Black (1987, 1991) argue that the failure of the state to protect students from experiencing uninterrupted learning, in situations where militancy, socio-political unrest, and ethnic conflict are concerned, results in a learning crisis. Therefore, attempts to continue education during conflict become increasingly difficult due to parents' fear of sending their children to school, due to perceived risk (Wani et al., 2022), revealing the enduring emotional impact on people's lives.

Objective of the Study

This paper navigates the complex relationship between schooling and the lived realities of students by tracing memories of learning during their school days. It explores how they make sense of their learning experiences and the challenges they faced in conflict-affected settings. The study thus aims to respond to three research questions: How do students remember their schooling experiences? How do they reflect on the learning experiences they had during school? What socio-emotional challenges do they encounter while learning amidst conflict? Notably, there is a lack of significant research on the ground realities of learning in strife-torn regions like Manipur. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on education in conflict zones, with a specific focus on the Indian context.

Methodology

The research aims to gain insights into students' experiences of schooling in conflict-affected areas through in-depth dialogue. In keeping with this aim, a phenomenological qualitative study was adopted to explore the narratives of five undergraduate and five master's degree students currently enrolled in different universities in Delhi. All 10 of them completed their schooling in Imphal, Manipur, a region that has experienced prolonged conflict. The phenomenological approach explores "how the psychological and social phenomena people experience are constituted and sustained through the process of interpretation and social interaction in which they engage" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, as cited in Hammersley, 2013, p. 28), which this study aims to understand. The participants were selected using snowballing technique and the sample comprised four self-identified male students and six female students, in the age group of 18–25 years. It included three Meitei participants, two from different tribes within the Kuki community, and five from different Naga tribes in Manipur, ensuring broader community representation. All participants had attended private schools in Imphal affiliated with both state⁸ and central⁹ boards of education, except for one student who attended a state government school during higher secondary education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was employed to identify emerging patterns within the data. Data collection took place between December 2019 and February 2020, prior to the nationwide lockdown caused by COVID-19 and the ethnic conflict that began in 2023 in Manipur. My personal experience of schooling in conflict regions further shaped the conduct of this study, and informed my positionality as an insider to these experiences. To uphold the ethical integrity of this research, participants' names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Findings and Discussions

The findings have been categorised around three broad themes- memories of schooling, experiences of learning, and social-emotional well-being.

Memories of Schooling Amid Bandhs and Strikes

The larger socio-political conflicts, ethnic tensions and civil unrest are often manifested commonly in the form of bandhs, general strikes, and curfews in Imphal. Bandhs are used synonymously with general strikes, and described as a form of agitation to accomplish one's

⁸ Manipur school board councils in Manipur: Board of Secondary Education Manipur & Council of Higher Secondary Education Manipur

⁹ Central Board of Secondary Education

goal or demands (Sharma, 2014). It derives from a Hindi word meaning “closed” (Sharma, 2014) and is also referred to as the “forced closures” of public activities (Hassan, 2006, p.24). In Manipur, the announcement of a general strike is accompanied by temporary shutdown of businesses (both large and small), institutional inactivity, restrictions on mobility, and social activities. Curfews are administrative restrictions imposed to prevent movement of people during specified hours, typically to maintain social order. Rebecca (2008) considered these strikes, bandhs, blockades or curfews as manifestations of conflict. Thus, conflict no longer appears to be just a disagreement between two or more contending parties but has also evolved as a means to get immediate public and government attention, a form of resistance, often seen spearheaded by student bodies, or civil society groups to demand justice, accountability, and solutions. When asked about their perceptions of conflict, one student said, “The only way for any organisation to get attention from the government.... In Manipur, bandh or general strike means total shut down of schools and offices” (J. Home, personal communication, January 2020).

In many ways, the educational crisis became inevitable because of frequent school closures, truncated number of days for learning engagement, impacting both students’ social life and learning. While there are no documented days of school closures in Manipur, the official number of bandhs and blockade-related disruptions was estimated at 297 days between 2004-2011, and 628 between 1995-2010 (Singha, 2013; Hueiyen News Services, 2010), suggesting a grave picture of educational disruption in the region. The following section discusses key themes from the findings.

Difficulty in Recollecting Memories from School

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the difficulty in remembering events from school. Most of the participants appeared to experience difficulty when asked to share anecdotes or learning experiences from school. The memories they shared about schooling included “teachers visiting home,” “the ease of transitioning to the next class without having to appear for exams,” “of schools being shut” and lots of “unexpected holidays.” Memories of learning, classroom interactions, or being in a school space which are vital for social learning were glaringly absent in most narratives. The following excerpts bring out this experience more clearly:

Right before we gave our board exam, our school principal visited my house and prayed for us. That happy moment of my high school days is what I cherished the most. (J. Home, personal communication, January 2020)

I remember one conflict... schools were boycotted that year. I was in 8th standard and we easily got promoted... Yeah, actually, since the class was boycotted, we didn't go to school and the school authorities agreed to promote (us). (Anni, personal communication, December 2019)

Since there were lots of strikes, not covering our syllabuses became a norm and sometimes we cannot even celebrate Teacher's Day or engage in extracurricular activities... We have also forgotten about the actual celebrations and activities as it stopped happening. So, I don't have exciting stories to tell about my schooling days. My schooling was boring when I think about it...like... that's how it is studying in Imphal. (Suji, personal communication, December 2019)

The excerpts above bring out how some of the most important memories of school were not located within the school settings for most. Having positive relationships with school authorities, participation in sports activities, were among the few peaceful memories recalled by participants. While easy class promotion after school inactivity was recalled as memorable by one participant, others struggled to recall meaningful school experiences. School as a place for learning was, however, found to be missing from their memories, revealing the negative impact that infrequent school activities have on people's perceptions of joyful learning. This also confirms the understanding that positive memories of learning remain socially embedded (Dewey, 1963; Wenger, 1998) and making that space available for students is crucial. In the absence of school life in many parts of their primary stages of learning, memories of classroom engagement or participation in events remain non-existent within the school setting. As a result, school for some had become just a word with no meaningful memories. This is largely a result of conflicts prevailing during most of their schooling life, limiting their opportunities for meaningful participation.

Frequent Holidays and Absenteeism Reducing School Engagement

General strikes and bandhs are common occurrences and are associated with holidays during their school life. One participant recalled, “General strike was a very common phenomenon. So, whenever there is ‘General’ attached to it, we get holidays” (Suji, personal communication, December 2019).

What makes school life absent from the memories of students is not always holidays due to “conflict derivatives” (Rebecca, 2008), but rather a lack of safety and security that educational institutions failed to ensure during crises, which often kept students voluntarily or involuntarily away from school. Their experiences are shared in the excerpts below:

I was not that regular in high school and in my 11th and 12th classes. The classes did not happen properly because we never know...when or what time they may protest or when the student bodies may come. Police are always stationed outside our school campus. (Maya, personal communication, January 2020)

Voluntary school absences as preventive measures in high-risk situations emerged strongly from participants’ responses, indicating that conflict contributed to a decline in students’ school attendance. This aligns with what Galindo-Silva and Tchunte (2023) observed in their study of the impact of armed conflict in Cameroon, where they found that higher levels of conflict risk lead to increased teacher and student absenteeism, resulting in widening learning gaps and lower academic performance later on.

Reduced school engagement was experienced by many as a “loss of opportunity” to learn and intellectually grow, or “lost days or years.” However, not all recollections of schools being closed were shared as negative or marked as a loss. A few respondents shared that the holidays they received due to general strikes during their schooling days were enjoyable. One participant shared:

I remember getting lots of holidays during my schooling days...Suppose, you get 20 working days in a month to go to school, but we usually get about a week more of holidays in between. We used to like holidays a lot, but if it gets stretched out for months, we used to get tired of it, even though I was not quite fond of studying (laughs). (Suji, personal communication, December 2019)

An unexpected holiday during a regular academic routine can sometimes bring respite for students, but frequent occurrence of holidays may also be detrimental to their academic lives and personal development. Conflict can thus appear fragmented and brief in some cases, or persist over long periods, affecting their overall school engagement.

Memories and Dilemmas of Participation in Protests

The most common way to gain public and government attention was organising rallies involving students. Student activism in Manipur is argued to extend beyond educational concerns, often addressing issues related to the objectives under which these bodies were established. The complexity is further intensified by the demographic composition of different ethnic communities (Shimray, 2004). Therefore, the establishment of the All Manipur Student Union (AMSU) in 1965, mainly based in the Meitei dominated valley region; followed by the All Naga Students' Association Manipur (ANSAM) in 1968, Kuki Students' Organisation (KSO) in 1971, and other smaller organisations is traced to have its own political and educational agendas (Mangang & Singh, 2025). The All Tribal Students' Union Manipur (ATSUM) was later established in 1973-74 to collectively look after the welfare of tribal students (Rongreisek, 2013). Directives issued by these student bodies can have a substantial impact on student participation, as they emerge as active forces of resistance, often positioning themselves at the forefront of such agitations. At the same time, some students may find themselves in vulnerable positions within the broader pursuit of public demands in contexts of conflict. For instance, one respondent shared, "I remember going to a rally (for ILP) where one student got shot accidentally and died while protesting. That student was a friend of my friend" (Tanu, personal communication, November 2019).

Even as memories of peer interactions, classroom participation and learning in the school space were absent from the recollections, a strong theme that emerged was the "loss of lives of fellow students and youth," along with a "fear for life and safety." The presence of student casualties in their experiences raises questions about the vulnerability of institutions during crises and the safety of school premises, which is not examined in this paper. However, it highlights that participation in student activism begins at a very early stage in schooling, and does not wait until higher education to begin. In the context of violent student protest, students' safety and security are often compromised, and without adequate education on peaceful protest or protective strategies, participation can be highly risky, especially since school children are involved. Peer interaction centred around the loss of friends can reveal a deeply entrenched

trauma, although it may not be visibly manifested. These emerged as an important part of the experience of schooling years. A few excerpts highlight these experiences better:

Flashback to the year 2009, in the middle of the year, all the schools at Imphal Valley were boycotted by the student organisation called AMSU (All Manipur Students' Union). Reason being for killing (innocent people) by police commandos (Rabina-Sanjit's case). Schools and institutions were boycotted for 5 months; this affected almost all the students in the valley area. (Moran, personal communication, February 2019)

I was in class 12. It (ILP) started in that year only (2015) and carried on until I was in my first year of college (in Delhi). You know what? One student was killed at that time. Robinhood. He died during the protest. (Suji, personal communication, December 2019)

Even when going outside of homes had so many dangers, their responses implied that the imagination of school as a safe space (not just pedagogically but also physically) was absent. Instead, a noticeable shift from participation within the school environment to participation outside traditional school settings, such as protests, was evident from their responses. This highlighted the vulnerability of students to forced participation, especially when being exposed to external pressure caused by conflict. This does not mean that all experiences of student participation in a protest ended up being negative. A response by one indicated that an individual's choice to abstain from protest becomes increasingly difficult within the school setting, where participation often transforms into a perceived collective responsibility. One student reported staying home to avoid participation in the protest. This instance provided a subtle insight into student participation being shaped by conflict, "I was in class 11. I remember AMSU (All Manipur Students' Union) calling for a student rally (called for participation of all the schools irrespective of government or private schools) but when that happened, I chose to stay home" (Anni, personal communication, December 2019).

In such a scenario, the risk of radicalising their perspectives becomes significantly higher in the absence of proper adult supervision, and thus increases the chances of young students facing physical, psychological, and emotional casualties.

The Impact of Conflict on Students' Learning Experiences

Dewey (1938) emphasises the importance of active participation of students in shaping their own purposes for learning, advocating engagement through experience rather than the traditional educational model of passive learning, where students act as silent receptacles. This theme discusses how conflict affects educational and social environments, which are critical for shaping and sustaining the conditions necessary for students to learn confidently in a society free from unnecessary constraints, fear, and trauma.

Absence of Strong Learning Foundations Due to a Fluctuating Academic Routine

School closures due to bandhs disrupt the continuity of learning lessons. Extended gaps between previously covered materials and upcoming lessons can further alienate students from their learning, contributing to widening learning gaps. To bridge this gap, schools often rush to complete the syllabus towards the end of the academic year. Some narratives given below suggest that maintaining meaningful engagement in schools (Dewey, 1963), and creating spaces for sustained dialogic interactions with teachers and peers to cultivate critical thinking (Freire, 1970) were difficult because of the conditions created by conflict. One student noted, "It was very challenging as a student to have proper schooling without a specific routine" (Tanu, personal communication, November 2019). Another said,

...what is being taught on Monday would have a follow-up to the lessons learned in the next class (referring to her experience in Delhi College) whereas in Manipur, since there was a huge break in the flow, we lost track of what we were learning...the schooling in Imphal doesn't have much teacher-student interaction compared to schooling in Delhi... I want schooling in Imphal to be more interactive. Students and teachers should build a positive and healthy relationship. (Moran, personal communication, February 2019)

Conflict creates a situation where learning cannot be consistently pursued. Maintaining strict discipline remained ineffective for many, as their learning process became discontinuous. Extended gaps lead to forgetfulness, loss of interest, and academic negligence in students, if lessons are not engaged consistently and aligned with previous lessons. Therefore, the notion of continuous learning appeared to be largely absent from their narratives. The lack of opportunities to develop conceptual clarity during school made many students struggle compared to their peers, even during the initial year of college. The insecurity stemming from

poor foundational knowledge was reflected prominently in their experiences. It becomes critical to ask what meaningful learning experiences students can sustain when their foundations have been weakened by the continuous disruption of schooling due to conflict.

Most students mentioned experiencing a passive pedagogical approach to learning in their respective schools, where textbook knowledge takes precedence over dialogic interaction, critical engagement, and classroom questioning, perpetuating a rather unidimensional learning experience. Learning that occurs in the absence of genuine understanding may contribute to a culture of rote memorisation, which can hinder the development of critical thinking and deep comprehension skills. The experiences are demonstrated by J. Home (personal communication, January 2020) who noted that “learning is not about understanding the subject anymore.” Further, J. Home added, “I would also say that though we have bookish knowledge (knowledge received from textbooks alone), as well as other knowledge acquired besides books, we are not engaged in critical thinking compared to my friend who studied in Delhi.” Reflecting on these challenges, the student shared:

I sometimes regretted when it became so hard for me to adjust in the class (in Delhi) that I should have received better education back in my schooling days. I believe it would have been different had I received schooling like my current classmates have received.

Similar experiences of rote learning may be observed in non-conflict contexts. Rote learning, as explained by Mayer (2002), refers to a situation in which a person acquires relevant information through reading or instruction but is unable to apply that knowledge to solve problems. In contrast, meaningful learning occurs when an individual actively engages with mental and cognitive processes, which enables them to understand, relate, and effectively solve problems. Conflict situations intensified the practice of rote learning while rushing to cover the syllabus, thus leaving a sense of regret and comparison among many, especially when encountering learning challenges during university education. The excerpts indicate personal dissatisfaction emerging from a lack of meaningful epistemic interactions in the past. All these experiences may largely be attributed to disruptions in schooling, limiting students’ exposure beyond prescribed materials due to time constraints, thereby affecting the development of strong learning foundations.

Frequent exposure to conflict and a truncated school year also pushed students to cram the remaining syllabus within a short time frame, mostly toward the end of the academic year. This led to information overload, rendering learning experiences of students ineffective for many. This issue of cramming persisted even after peace had returned to Manipur because of delays in the academic calendar. As a result, efforts toward academic recovery were often accompanied by additional pressure and demands on students. For instance, a few participants shared:

... Our teacher tried to cover our syllabus within a short time frame, and since they could not complete it, they gave us portions to read which seemed important and may come in the exam. So, we couldn't get to learn the whole thing but just a gist of everything to pass the exam...it was difficult to catch up with my studies as my basic knowledge was not understood. (Tanu, personal communication, November 2019)

Since we are affiliated to Manipur board where marking systems was not lenient, it wasn't easy for us to score well as compared to those who did their schooling from CBSE board. (Joy, personal communication, February 2020)

Complete or Partial Lack of Teachers' Guidance During Social Crisis

The conflict situation has made adult supervision of students' learning nearly impossible. Many students expressed their struggles to pass exams largely through self-study. Complex concepts require sufficient guidance from teachers to be fully understood. Based on Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development," effective learning occurs in the space between what an individual can learn independently and what they can achieve with appropriate guidance. While self-study may benefit some students, others require scaffolding to compensate for their learning gaps. The given excerpt would help us understand this better, "As for me, I had to go visit my teachers at their homes and clarify my doubts in a short time. My way of preparation is 75% self-study, I would say" (Suji, personal communication, December 2019).

The space provided for students to enhance their knowledge through teacher and peer interactions is involuntarily reduced due to conflict. As a result, social interaction becomes limited within the school learning environment, which may result in a failure to provide adequate inter-psychological space for social engagement necessary for social learning to occur

(Vygotsky, 1978). Lack of sufficient guidance during lessons makes it harder for students to experience meaningful learning, although it may encourage self-study. There is an involuntary shift in the learning process from social to individual, and from receiving maximum support to minimal, within a short time frame. In contexts of social crisis and digital collapse, where internet connections are suspended amid school closures, proper guidance at home from an expert or a learned individual is often difficult to find in many households. Therefore, students' role as active learners in a collaborative learning setting may not be fully realised. In this scenario, it is critical to note that learning through social interaction and collaboration as a "community of learners," where an expert guides a novice, becomes increasingly difficult (Rogoff, 1995, 2009). From this vantage point, conflict plays a direct role in impeding opportunities for collaborative learning among students. As a result, many students are left struggling to meet their academic expectations.

School Disruptions Acting as a Push for Tuition Centres

Learning can be continuous when schools function smoothly without interruptions and when classes are held at consistent intervals. Intermittent outbreaks of small-scale conflict, leading to short-term bandhs, disrupt the regular pattern of schooling. That is when tuition emerges as a primary learning alternative for students, helping them to replenish academic deficiencies. Bray (2007) defined private tuitions as supplementary education that runs parallel to formal education, though its terminology, privateness, levels of education, or forms may vary by regional contexts. In the Indian context, the characteristics and forms of private tuition are determined by demand, the size of student group, and place (at home or centres) (Sujatha, 2014). The private tuition that most students referred to is group tuition received at teachers' homes or coaching centres. Some pursued private tuition primarily for preparing pre-university entrance examinations or secondary school, and for filling the knowledge gap created by irregular schooling (Chingtham, 2015). In this context, tuition appears as a non-negotiable option in students' lives, where their primary learning becomes dependent. This dependency is exacerbated by school disruption and the increasing pursuit for learning. Some of the prominent narratives emerging from the interviews are discussed below:

School plays a secondary role and tuitions play a primary part. Even our parents and teachers would recommend taking tuitions. (Anni, personal communication, December 2019)

Tuition is like a trend. Every parent thinks that if their children did not take tuition, they are lagging behind and believe they may not be able to perform well in studies. (Moran, personal communication, February 2019)

The availability of teachers' guidance has shifted from formal schools to tuition centres.

Young (2009) posits that "... Schools enable or can enable young people to acquire the knowledge that for most of them cannot be acquired at home or in the community, or, for adults, in workplaces" (p. 13). In the absence of the school learning space, tuition centres emerge as an alternative to school. It has evolved from being a supplementary extension of school-based learning to becoming the primary space where most conceptual learning takes place and has begun to dominate the learning landscape. As a result, tuition outside school has been conditionally normalised and widely accepted by both parents and educators. I argue that the normalisation of learning as centred in tuition settings, rather than in schools, is largely a response to conflict, created by the failure of formal schooling, which has led to an increasing dependence on alternative learning spaces. Narratives from two participants highlight this fact:

I also don't rely on schooling to prepare for exams. And since tuition is like insurance (here I'm speaking on behalf of most of us), we are able to cope with the dilemma of preparing for exams. (J. Home, personal communication. January 2020)

We also had this unusual reliance on tuition to cover our syllabuses and not on schools... I also thought that since there was tuition, I didn't care about what I was studying in school, as I had an alternate option. (Moran, personal communication, February 2019)

Alternatively, students who relied solely on school learning found it difficult to keep up with their studies without tuition. It was often the students who came from other places to study in Imphal, without parental or familial presence nearby, who suffered an additional burden during conflict. One participant said:

...I have a friend who came from Senapati (one of the 16 districts of Manipur). She was very serious about studies. She thought she would get better education if she studied in

Imphal but said she did not learn many things. Since she did not take any tuition, she told me it was very hard for her. (Suji, personal communication, December 2019)

The unpredictability of conflict heightened students' concerns about successfully completing their schooling on time because of delays in the academic calendar. Only a few students reported having their foundational learning adequately covered within a year, primarily with the help of tuition, and this learning gap has persisted as a significant obstacle to their educational progress. Among them, students preparing for board exams were most vulnerable during the crisis, as they feared underperforming in examinations that are critical for their academic advancement. The excerpt stated also suggested that compensating for learning deficits through tuition meant additional financial burden on students outside school. Sen (2005) argues that private tuition has widened not just the learning gap but also the social gap between students, since it is more accessible to affluent families as a "safety valve," and argued against its practice. In regions where crisis is prevalent, it becomes essential to note that socio-economic conditions of the families also add to the learning challenges of students.

Impact of Academic Disruption on the Emotional Well-Being of Students

The trauma ingrained by conflict can potentially become a significant impediment to students' growth. Heckman, Pinto, and Savelyev (2013) observed that conflict intensity bears a negative impact on academic achievement due to mental health concerns and violence-related trauma, and asserts that externalising the behaviour at an early age could lead to sounder adulthood. Schultz (1977) commented that Fromm's belief about realising one's full potential, considering the emotional well-being of a person, requires a safe environment where the "natural tendency for growth" is not interfered with by social forces, which have the potential to produce "sick people" with psychological complications (p.41). Psychological challenges such as social anxiety, fear of public speaking, or developing characteristics such as being timid, shy, and hopeless were important feelings that emerged from their experiences, which they claimed to carry with them until now. A participant noted that "It (conflicts) creates a negative and scary impact on our minds" (Suji, personal communication, December 2019), while another reflected, "One of the most challenging moments I have faced as a student is social anxiety" (Joy, personal communication, February 2020).

The given narratives suggest that though people may cope differently depending on a variety of factors, sustained emotional challenges as well as psychological impacts remain internally

with them for a long period of time. Their anxiety, which primarily stems from a lack of conceptual clarity and academic preparedness during school, continues to permeate during the initial year of university. Many students identified their inability to express doubts in class, often due to shyness and hesitation to admit learning challenges. This acts as a significant barrier to meaningful engagement in the classroom. Consequently, feelings of regret and disappointment about their past learning experiences became even more pronounced, especially when they compared themselves with peers.

These lingering feelings of insecurity may have been exacerbated by the failure to develop emotional security and self-confidence during the schooling stage, and when left unresolved during their stages of academic growth, can lead to questioning their sense of self and their academic competence (Erikson, 1950). As a result, most students reported remaining “silent” in class because they were unable to communicate effectively, with the exception of one male student whose schooling took place during peaceful times. Thus, the cycle of insecurity tends to persist when they could not interact much in class, delaying the time to fully enjoy learning in a new environment. The behavioural components as seen from students’ experiences suggest that instead of externalising aggressive behaviour, they rather appear timid instead, doubting their academic competence.

Furthermore, the uncertainty caused by conflict situations has intensified students’ fear of falling behind peers studying in more stable environments with minimal school disruptions, drowning them in constant state of comparison.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of ten university students who did their schooling in Manipur, focusing on how conflict disruptions shaped their engagement and learning. Their lived experiences revealed realities that are often overlooked as normal daily occurrences during crises. Given the multiplicities of contexts and positioning of different communities in Manipur, experiences of some may not be representative of all, though these narratives are definitely helpful in understanding experiences of some and gaining insights about life in Manipur.

Conflict-related disruptions caused intermittent discontinuity in learning, resulting in gaps in students’ learning experiences within school. These disruptions limit opportunities for social

participation or dialogic interaction, essential for meaningful and collaborative learning to coexist. School disruptions have made it extremely difficult for students to engage meaningfully in formal educational settings. Furthermore, conflict has exacerbated and normalised dependence on private tuition as a primary source of learning instead of formal schooling. In a conflict context, their sense of participation often shifts outside school premises, particularly during protests without much preparation to ensure their safety. Therefore, narratives of casualties during such unfortunate events are deeply embedded in their experiences, where young students are vulnerable to both emotional and physical harm. The paper also reflects the lingering impact of learning deficiencies on students' lives after school, often manifested in the form of regret, disappointment, and anxiety over the loss of learning years when comparing themselves with peers at university.

In this context, protecting youth from conflict-related school disruptions is an urgent priority to safeguard both education and future opportunities. Promoting awareness among young people about peaceful protest and dialogic forms of resistance can support a more democratic way of resolving conflict. The availability of counsellors in schools becomes extremely necessary to monitor students' emotional well-being, especially in conflict affected regions. Broadcasting lessons through television or radio via governmental programmes like SWAYAM PRABHA TV, along with material sources from SWAYAM and DIKSHA, may offer some possibilities for continuing learning; but, in volatile situations where access to the internet or television is limited, developing context-sensitive strategies to ensure safe and sustained learning environments requires immediate public attention.

References:

- Abu-Zahra, N., & Kay, A. (2013). *Unfree in Palestine: Registration, documentation and movement restriction*. Pluto Press.
- Avruch, K., & Black, P. W. (1987). A generic theory of conflict resolution: A critique. *Negotiation Journal*, 3(1), 87–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1571-9979.1987.tb00395.x>
- Avruch, K., & Black, P. W. (1991). The culture question and conflict resolution. *Peace & Change*, 16(1), 22–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0130.1991.tb00563.x>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. The Penguin Press.
- Boulding, K. E. (2018). *Conflict and defence: A general theory*. Pickle Partners Publishing.

- Bray, M. (2007). *The shadow education system: Private tutoring and its implications for planners* (2nd ed.). International Institute for Educational Planning.
- Brück, T., Di Maio, M., & Miaari, S. H. (2019). Learning the hard way: The effect of violent conflict on student academic achievement. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 17(5), 1502–1537. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvy051>
- Butalia, U. (2008). *Interrogating peace: The Naga-Kuki conflict in Manipur*. Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst e.V. (EED).
- Chen, L. C. (2015, September 2). What is the Inner Line Permit controversy in Manipur? *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/who-is-what-is/story/what-is-inner-line-permit-people-manipur-are-demanding-260803-2015-09-02>
- Chingtham, T. (2015). Necessary evils of private tuitions: A case study. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)*, 5(2), 6–11.
- Dahrendorf, R. (1959). *Class and class conflict in industrial society*. Stanford University Press.
- Das, P. (2023, June 21). The unfolding Kuki-Meitei conflict in Manipur. *The Sangai Express*. <https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/Encyc/2023/6/21/Pushpita-Das-Institute-of-Defence-Studies-and-Analyses-SummaryWhile-the-High-Court-s-directive.html>
- Dasgupta, K. (2016, May 01). Manipur: Unrest over three controversial bills refuses to die down. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/unrest-in-manipur-over-three-controversial-bills-refuses-to-die-down/story-voiuBxF2rRbYmWMkjKnCYM.html>
- Davies, L. (2005). Evaluating the link between conflict and education. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 2(2), 42–58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48603356>
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1963). *Experience and education*. Collier Books.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. W. W. Norton.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury Press.
- Galindo-Silva, H., & Tchuente, G. (2023). *Armed conflict and early human capital accumulation: Evidence from Cameroon's Anglophone conflict*. (GLO Discussion Paper No. 1295). Global Labor Organization. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/zbw/glodps/1295.html>
- Galtung, J. (2007). Introduction: Peace by peaceful conflict transformation - The TRANSCEND approach. In C. Webel & J. Galtung (Eds.), *Handbook of peace and conflict studies* (pp.14–32). Routledge.

- Garg, I. S. (2016, June 8). The complex politics of the 'Inner Line Permit' in Manipur. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/the-complex-politics-of-the-inner-line-permit-in-manipur/>
- Government of India. (2026). *Women and men in India 2025: Selected indicators and data*. Social Statistics Division, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. <https://www.mospi.gov.in/publications-reports/innerpage/2823>
- Government of India. (2012). *Statistics of school education 2010-2011*. Bureau of Planning, Monitoring & Statistics, Ministry of Human Resource Development. https://www.educationforallinindia.com/Statistics_of_School_Education_2010-11,%20MHRD.pdf
- Haji, M. (2012). Armed forces special power act: A call for repeal. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, 4(7), 12–15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351073>
- Hammersley, M. (2013). *What is qualitative research?* Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Hassan, M. S. (2006). *Explaining Manipur's breakdown and Manipur's peace: The state and identities in North East India* (Working Paper no. 79). Crisis States Programme, Development Research Centre, DESTIN, LSE. <https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/28150/1/wp79.pdf>
- Heckman, J., Pinto, R., & Savelyev, P. (2013). Understanding the mechanisms through which an influential early childhood program boosted adult outcomes. *The American Economic Review*, 103(6), 2052–2086. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.103.6.2052>
- Hueiyen News Services. (2010, July 8). Joy grills government on not dealing firmly with bandhs, blockades. *E-Pao*.
- Imphal Times. (2015, July 19). Mass protest continues over ILP issue and killing of Sapam Robinhood. *Imphal Times*. <https://www.imphaltimes.com/news/mass-protest-continues-over-ilp-issue-and-killing-of-sapam-robinhood/>
- Jürges, H., Stella, L., Hallaq, S., & Schwarz, A. (2022). Cohort at risk: Long-term consequences of conflict for child school achievement. *Journal of Population Economics*, 35, 1–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-020-00790-6>
- Khangchian, V. (2019). Understanding conflict in Manipur: A socio-historical perspective. *Social Change and Development*, 16(2), 41–58. https://www.socialchangeanddevelopment.in/downloads/july2019/article-3_3.pdf
- Kipgen, N. (2013). Politics of ethnic conflict in Manipur. *South Asia Research*, 33(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728013475541>

- Laithangbam, I. (2015, July 9). Student's death sparks protest in Manipur. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/protests-in-imphal-after-sapam-robinhood-was-reportedly-killed-in-police-firing/article7399508.ece>
- Mangang, S. G., & Singh, E. B. (2025). A comparative analysis of student movements in Manipur: A review paper. *International Journal of Social Science Research*, 2(5), 420–432. <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2025.v2.i5.30652>
- Mayer, R. E. (2002). Rote versus meaningful learning. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(4), 226–232. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4104_4
- Oinam, B. (2003). Patterns of ethnic conflict in the North-East: A study on Manipur. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(21), 2031–2037. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4413594>
- Rahman, M. Z. (2010). *The Mao Gate standoff: A case for Greater Nagalim?* Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. https://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=3125
- Rai, S. (2018). *Conflict, education and the people's war in Nepal*. Routledge.
- Rebecca, D. N. (2008). Conflict situation and children's education in Manipur. *Journal of Indian Education*, 34(3), 25–31.
- Rogers, C. R. (1969). *Freedom to learn*. Merrill.
- Rogoff, B. (1995). Observing sociocultural activity on three planes: Participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship. In J. V. Wertsch, P. del Río, & A. Alvarez (Eds.), *Sociocultural studies of mind* (pp. 139–164). Cambridge University Press.
- Rogoff, B. (2009). Developing understanding of the idea of communities of learners. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 1, 209–229.
- Rongreisek, Y. (2013, December 30). Reminiscing how ATSUM was born: In my version part I. *E-Pao*.
- Schmidt, S. M., & Kochan, T. A. (1972). Conflict: Toward conceptual clarity. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17, 359–370.
- Schultz, D. P. (1977). *Growth psychology: Models of the healthy personality*. Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.
- Sen, A. (2005). Deficiencies of primary education in India. *Pedocs (German Institute for International Educational Research)*, 28(1), 7–12.
- Sharma, S. K. (2014). *Dynamics of Bandhs and Blockades in Northeast India: A study of Manipur and the way ahead* (Manekshaw Paper no. 48). Centre for Land Warfare Studies.

- Shimray, U. A. (2004). Socio-political unrest in the region called North-East India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39(42), 4637–4643.
- Singh, B. (2017, February 28). CBI reopens Manipur’s fake encounter case. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/cbi-reopens-fake-encounter-cases/articleshow/57382498.cms?from=mdr>
- Singh, N. S. (2011). State of education in Manipur. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(23), 12–13.
- Singha, K. (2013). Conflict, state and education in India: A case study of Manipur. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 1, 181–193. <https://doi.org/10.12691/education-1-6-3>
- Sujatha, K. (2014). Private tuition in India: Trends and issues. *Revue internationale d’Éducation de Sèvres*. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ries.3913>
- Sunil, O. (2017, February 19). ‘Fake encounters’ come back to haunt Manipur Congress. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/fake-encounters-come-back-to-haunt-manipur-cong/articleshow/57210975.cms>
- The Hindu Bureau. (2025, September 06). AFSPA extended in parts of Manipur, Arunachal and Nagaland for another six months. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/mha-extends-afspa-in-parts-of-manipur-arunachal-and-nagaland-for-another-six-months/article70098633.ece>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Wani, A. S., Singh, D. K., & Singh, P. (2022). Hartal (strike) happens here everyday: Understanding impact of disruption on education in Kashmir. *Proceedings of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3491102.3502126>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (2009). A social theory of learning. In K. Illeris (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists — In their own words*, (pp. 209–218). Routledge.
- Young, M. (2009). What are schools for? In H. Lauder, J. Porter, & H. Daniels (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on education*, (pp. 10-18). Routledge.