Shifting democracies:
A case study of how the 2021 coup changed an alternative education programme in Myanmar.

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Abstract

This study examines how an elite alternative adult education programme in Myanmar taught *within*, *for*, and *through* democracy – and how its operations 'democratically' shifted due to the 2021 military coup. Former faculty and students of the programme conducted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study using a framework adopted from Sant's (2019) theoretical review of democratic education. The research collective analyses how the programme embodied eight different discourses of democratic education (elite, liberal, neoliberal, multicultural, deliberative, participatory, critical, and agonistic) before the coup and how these democratic models transformed after the coup. The collective found that the coup caused a split in the programme resulting in institutional decision-making becoming more elite and neoliberal while operational decision-making and pedagogy became more deliberative, participatory, critical, and agonistic. We explore how conflict can be a democratic learning experience, and how education through democracy can make a learning community more resilient in the face of conflict.

Key Words

democratic education, deliberative pedagogy, critical thinking, agonism

Introduction

The relationship between education and democracy has been a central concern of scholars and educators since the emergence of the national education projects. The alternative, community-based education programmes of Myanmar provide a compelling context for examining this relationship. In the years before the 2021 military coup destroyed the country's fledgling democracy, many of these non-state programmes integrated materials on Politics and Active Citizenship into their curricula. Since the 2021 coup, there have been even more bottom-up attempts to practice 'democratic education' in Myanmar. The National Unity Government, the parallel governing body composed of lawmakers ousted by the military, produced a handbook titled 'Upper Secondary Teacher's Resources on Civic Education' (2023), which reveals the important role of democratic education in their political vision. Researchers have studied the diverse political projects of various groups in Myanmar – many of which pursue contrasting visions of democracy (Walton, 2017; Wells, 2021). The link between these projects and 'democratic education' are still blurry.

This poses a problem, as both the concept of democracy and the notion of democratic education are contested. Chomsky explains how the term democracy is 'heavily ideologically laden' and often manipulated to serve those in power (Chomsky, 2002, p.29). Edda Sant (2019) argues that democratic education is a 'floating signifier', a concept which different discourses struggle to invest with their preferred meaning. In her theoretical review of democratic education, Sant (2019) identifies eight philosophies of democracy (Table 1) which emerged through her coding of 377 articles on democratic

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education. Many overlap and some are contradictory – as are the educational policies and practices associated with them. Democracy, as concept and practice, is also fundamentally contested in Myanmar, with even military junta leaders claiming the term. Scholars have identified the use of variants like 'disciplined', 'benevolent', 'rights-based' and 'moral' democracy (Walton, 2017; Wells, 2021). In this context, our project tries to understand the multiple, shifting meanings of democratic education in Myanmar, before and after the 2021 coup.

This study explores how a single non-state, alternative school for adults in Myanmar embodied multiple democratic philosophies, including philosophies which work in favour of democracy and, paradoxically, some which work against democracy. We show how these democratic philosophies and their associated policies and practices shifted during the year-long program as a result of the 2021 coup and discuss the implications of these shifts. Thus, we seek to ground the philosophies, policies and practices of democratic education in the concrete situation of a single learning community, to better understand the contested terrain of democratic education in Myanmar. We hope educators in Myanmar may learn from this study; that it may help schools align their community's vision for a democratic future with that community's educational practices.

Theoretical framework

In mapping the school's democratic philosophies, we focused on the overt structures of the school as well as its hidden curriculum (Apple, 2019). We use Sant's framework of eight philosophies (Table 1) in order to show how this Myanmar case connects to the broader literature on democratic education.

Table 1: Eight philosophies of democracy, pro/against democracy, educating for/within/through democracy (Adopted from Sant, 2019)

Democratic philosophy	Definition
Elite **against** *Within*	The elitist philosophy of democracy argues that society should be controlled by a small elite. This elite guarantees social stability and is periodically accountable to ordinary citizens through voting.
Liberal **Pro** and **against** *For*	A liberal democracy is a social contract between those who govern and those who are governed. Liberals prioritise individual rights and freedoms.
Neoliberal **against** *Within*	Neoliberals conceive of democracy as the aggregation of individual social preferences. Neoliberals privilege 'negative liberty' and see markets as forums in which individuals' views compete.
Multicultural **pro** *Through*	Multiculturalist democratic theorists prioritise diversity and plurality.
Deliberative **pro** *Through and For*	Deliberative democrats see citizens as equal co-authors of public decisions, which are discussed in public forums.
Participatory **pro** *Through and For*	Participatory democracy is similar to deliberative democracy, but the focus is on action and praxis rather than communication and consensus. Participation is the citizen's prime responsibility.
Critical **pro** *Through and For*	According to critical democratic theorists, democracy depends on understanding the material inequalities that structure society and on working toward economic redistribution.
Agonistic **pro** *Through and For*	According to agonistic democratic theorists, democracy depends on constant dissent. Agonistic democracy does not aim for consensus or agreement (unlike deliberative democracy) but sees conflict as inherent to human uniqueness.

Some of these eight philosophies paradoxically work against democracy. In Sant's review of the literature on democratic education, most scholars saw elite and neoliberal philosophies, and the policies associated with them, as hindering democracy. That said, others believed these philosophies genuinely contributed to democracy.

Besides defining eight versions of democratic education, Sant (2019) also categorised pedagogical policies and practices of democratic education as working either for, within, and through democracy. Education that works for democracy focuses on equipping students 'with the knowledge and skills they need to perform as democratic citizens' (Sant, 2019, p. 683). This citizenship is positioned as something to be realised beyond the school setting and at a future stage of life. This pedagogical approach is associated in particular with the liberal discourse of democratic education. Education that works within democracy is predominantly associated with the elite and neoliberal discourses of democratic education. Proponents make relatively few recommendations for pedagogical practice, as they conceive of education and democracy as independent of one another. Policies associated with education within democracy include school choice, standardisation and accountability through rankings. In education through democracy, 'students are de facto acting as citizens, and democratic learning is enacted through democratic participation' (Sant, 2019, p. 684). Members of the learning community are involved in decision-making. Education and democracy are intertwined. Participatory, agonistic, critical, deliberative and multicultural theorists align on the value of education through democracy.

Methodology

Reciprocal participatory action research

This case study explores democratic education at one institution in Myanmar through a reciprocal Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology involving a collective of participant-researchers. The collective consisted of six former faculty and staff members (the entire teaching faculty of the institution) and four former students out of a student body of 36. The former students were invited to the collective because of their research interests in education. Utilising the PAR methodology as described by Martin *et al*. (2019) members of our research collective acted as both researchers and participants, both carrying out interviews and being interviewed themselves. All members of the collective helped to varying degrees with data collection, analysis, and writing. The project was reflective and reciprocal in that collective members were constantly in dialogue with one another, reflecting on their shared experiences and analysing the data together.

One limitation of this study is the absence of perspectives from the programme leadership, which could have provided insights into their decision-making processes. Additionally, the number of student participants was small, which constrained the range of viewpoints captured. However, for the purpose of this paper, participant-researchers felt that the data gathered was enough to start a conversation about democratic education that we believe can be generative for learning communities in Myanmar, its borderlands, and beyond. In the future, the researchers hope to gather data from programme leadership in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of how the learning community was – and is still – affected by the coup. Another limitation of the study is the need to maintain confidentiality, which restricts our ability to discuss potential identifiers, such as participants' backgrounds and the school's position within the Myanmar education ecosystem.

Data gathering

Data was gathered through three focus groups (two with former faculty members and staff, and one with former students) and nine interviews with all but one of the participant-researchers. These focus groups and interviews were guided by the research questions of a broader qualitative project that examined different ways the learning community was affected by the coup. As such the questions explored how the learning community operated before the coup and how it operated afterward. During data collection, participant-researchers also found artefacts from the case study period, such as faculty and institutional public statements, online polls, email and messaging app correspondence, and programme schedules and curricula.

Data analysis

In this paper, our analysis centred on the question: How did our programme integrate different democratic philosophies and how did those democracies shift as a result of the 2021 coup? We deductively analysed our interview data and artefacts using codes mirroring Sant's eight democratic philosophies: elite, liberal, neoliberal, multicultural, deliberative, participatory, critical, and agonistic. Participant-researchers worked together to code the data. Direct quotations from the focus groups and interviews were categorised under the eight philosophies, which were then coded again as pertaining to the learning community before the coup and after the coup in order to illustrate how the programme changed.

Findings

Democratic philosophies before the coup

Table 2: Description of programme elements and corresponding democratic philosophies BEFORE the 2021 coup

Elements of democracies in the learning community	Philosophies pro and against democracy
Military rule/constitution: At the start of each year, faculty led a 'military rule' exercise. Students were told they had to follow a list of school rules that were purposely unjust. After a week, students were allowed to write new rules, creating the community's 'constitution'.	deliberative, participatory, agonistic
Disciplinary meeting: The punishment for breaking most rules was attending a Disciplinary Meeting. Two student representatives would mediate the infraction, with a faculty member chairing the meeting.	deliberative, participatory
Funding model: The programme was a pilot for a project to create an American-style university in Myanmar. The proposed funding model was based on the university funding model prevalent in America. This model relied in part on donations from wealthy elites, which in Myanmar often means cronies, and would place the university outside the reach of all but the wealthiest in society. A board of directors governed the programme in line with these future goals. However, the pilot programme was funded through grants and had a similar size and scope as other adult alternative education programmes.	neoliberal, elite
School demographics: Students were drawn from across Myanmar's ethnic regions and represented diverse social classes.	multicultural
Community meeting: All members of the programme gathered weekly to make announcements, raise concerns, and ask questions. A rotating student chair facilitated the community voting on school matters.	deliberative, participatory
Faculty meeting and student ambassador: Faculty members met weekly to discuss school matters. Two Student Ambassadors attended the meetings. Their role was to represent student interests in the meeting and report back to the student body on matters pertaining to them.	deliberative, participatory
Advising: Faculty and administrators met every two weeks with three to four advisees to ensure their academic and personal success.	participatory
Admissions: There was focus on high-performing students who were fluent in English. Only 36 students were admitted into the programme.	elite, liberal
School mission: The programme's mission was to create change-makers and future leaders.	elite, liberal

Elements of democracies in the learning community	Philosophies pro and against democracy
Curriculum: The programme's curriculum included courses on political economy, history, and ethics, which all sought to reveal the structural and material inequalities that underpin society.	critical
Critical thinking: Educating students in critical thinking was a pillar of the programme's curriculum. Students and faculty widely interpreted critical thinking as related to student-centred learning, where students were encouraged to express their opinions and question the teacher, in contrast to the Myanmar state's authoritarian teacher-centred education system.	liberal
Research projects: Project-based learning allowed students to take part in the design and implementation of their learning.	participatory

Some of these elements reinforced one another while others worked against each other. The admissions policy and school mission, which aimed to select and educate future leaders, worked against the multiculturalist goal of equal education for all social classes and ethnic groups. Other elements reinforced each other. For instance, elite and liberal philosophies complemented one another and were reinforced by a neoliberal funding model. The deliberative, participatory, critical, and agonistic elements of the programme also reinforced one another, spreading decision-making power across the learning community. The multicultural student and faculty body complemented these latter four philosophies. Voices from diverse ethnolinguistic and class groups were dialogically connected to deliberative, participatory, and agonistic processes and helped ground these processes in the material reality of many different groups.

It is also important to distinguish 'critical thinking', which is a hallmark of the liberal democratic philosophy, from the 'critical' philosophy of democratic education that Sant identifies. Critical thinking, conceived as a necessary skill for future liberal democratic citizens, is omnipresent in the Burmese discourse and practice of democratic education today. The 'critical' democratic philosophy, which Sant defines as critiquing social structural inequalities, for instance through Marxist theory, is also present in Myanmar today, but is more visible in e.g. organised labour than education (Aung and Campbell, 2024).

Democratic philosophies after the coup

Table 3: Description of new programmatic elements and those that shifted AFTER the 2021 coup and corresponding democratic philosophies

Elements of democracies in the learning community	Philosophies pro and against democracy
Official public statement on the coup: The institution's board of directors were slow to release an official statement on the coup, and the eventual statement did not explicitly condemn the coup. The board partly wanted to protect students and the institution from the ire of military-supporting donors, to whom the institution was bound thanks to its neoliberal funding model. However, many students, faculty and the wider community saw the statement as an attempt to prioritise the institution over the democratic future of the country. A large number of alumni protested publicly against the institution's equivocal statement, and the institution's reputation was negatively affected.	neoliberal, elite, agonistic

Elements of democracies in the learning community	Philosophies pro and against democracy
Programmatic decision-making: Leadership let faculty decide whether to suspend the program immediately after the coup, saying that it was an operational decision. Faculty discussed the ethics of keeping the program open. They decided that there was pedagogical value in learning from the events of the coup but that requiring students to attend courses was unethical given the desire of many to participate in protests and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) strike which shut down national schools.	**deliberative, participatory**
Voting: Faculty decided to deliberate with students on whether to close the school, using a series of online polls. The majority of students requested that the program remain open but that classes become optional. Faculty therefore decided to temporarily suspend ordinary classes, while offering new optional classes that reflected on unfolding events. Some pastoral activities (weekly Community Meeting, advising) continued. In the meantime, faculty and students were free to participate in the protests.	**deliberative, participatory**
New, optional courses: Faculty designed new optional courses, as students had requested in the online poll. These included a course comparing Myanmar's resistance movement to other revolutionary movements; a discussion group on non-violent demonstration reading Sharp (1994); a course on the psychology of resilience and resistance; a course on media and politics; and a course on the science behind the physical infrastructure of state surveillance of protestors. In addition to these courses, students could request independent studies with faculty members on topics they were interested in.	**critical, participatory, agonistic**
Faculty private statement on the coup: After reviewing the poll results, faculty released a statement to the students explaining the proposed changes. The statement argued that there was 'a profound, once in a lifetime opportunity to participate in and learn from the events unfolding', and hoped that the new classes would be 'flexible resources to help support the resistance'.	**deliberative, participatory**
Optional courses and graduation: All courses were made optional and graduation was no longer contingent on attending courses. Students were told they would all be given transcripts at the end of the program cycle that would include (if they had taken them) the new, optional classes.	**deliberative, participatory**
Advising: Advisors met with students more often; conversations focused more on personal well-being than academics.	**participatory**
Community meeting: Though classes were made optional, students were still asked to participate in Community Meeting. The structure of Community Meeting did not change, but in the absence of mandatory classes, its role in holding the learning community together became more pronounced.	**deliberative, participatory**
Protesting: Though the program neither encouraged nor condoned protesting, many students and faculty members protested, and in some instances they protested together. Faculty and students often integrated their experiences at protests into courses and discussed them in advising.	**participatory, agonistic**

Elements of democracies in the learning community	Philosophies pro and against democracy
School demographics: Although the program did not become more or less diverse as a result of the coup, former student participant-researchers reported that the multicultural community created prior to the coup was valuable for gaining different perspectives on the coup, which also led to different forms of participation in protests and other anti-coup activities.	**multicultural**
Funding model: Although the funding model of the program did not shift immediately, in August 2021 the programme launched a large new educational initiative. The leadership decided to make classes online-only for security reasons. This meant that tuition fees could be reduced substantially. One participant-researcher, the former administrator, said that these changes were partly a result of the agonistic pushback from former students against the official public statement, and the need for the institution to revamp its image. More courses were also offered in Burmese. The programme became more accessible to students from across Myanmar, including those internally displaced in the border regions and those who had to flee abroad.	**agonistic, multicultural, participatory**

Shifting democracies

The democratic philosophies of the programme shifted in four main ways in response to the 2021 coup. The first change in response to the coup was that institutional decision-making from leadership was perceived as becoming more elite and less deliberative. The second was that the decision-making of the faculty and students over the day-to-day operations and curriculum became more deliberative. This resulted in the third change which was that the curriculum immediately after the coup became more critical, participatory, and agonistic. For example, one teacher emailed students, 'we could study the protests in Hong Kong, and think about lessons we can learn from them. Or we could study authoritarian regimes around the world.' The changes to the curriculum were facilitated through multicultural dialogue as much or more than through the faculty's teaching, creating a circular praxis of critical reflection on agonistic participation in the resistance movement. For instance, one former student remarked that even though the student body was very diverse, he didn't put a lot of 'effort into understanding why they thought the way they did' about the country's politics, 'but after the coup, that changed,' because of the new conversations shaping the community. A fourth change was that the agonistic pushback by students and alumni against the board's official statement helped make the programme more affordable and accessible.

Discussion

Institutional split

The programme's leadership attempted to remain neutral on politics by not releasing a statement condemning the coup, which is emblematic of education within democracy, where policy-makers believe that 'education should be denuded of moral aspirations' (Sant, 2019, p. 682). Sant (2019, p.682) argues that the neoliberal philosophy behind this stance is 'currently dominant worldwide'. This stance could be seen on full display in 2024 as university leadership across the United States ignored student protests calling for their universities to divest from companies linked to Israel (Cabral and Faguy, 2024). However, our findings highlight how institutional divisions can become deeper splits in times of conflict.

When faculty asked leadership to deliberate with them on whether the programme should remain open or change its curriculum in response to the coup, the Executive Director replied in an email that it was an 'operational decision.' In other words, it was up to the faculty whether/how they wanted to continue programme operations. This choice by the leadership to relinquish their power over the daily operations solidified a shift where they focused on the institutional future of the programme, and where the faculty shifted toward more deliberative, participatory, and agonistic processes, sharing what institutional power they had with the remaining

students and staff in the programme. Although faculty have more power over the daily operations, their role in long-term planning for the programme was more limited than it was prior to the coup.

Conflict as a learning experience

One of our key findings is how learning communities can navigate or transform conflict situations into agonistic democratic education. When the institutional leadership gave the faculty the power to close the programme or change it, the country's civil disobedience movement had already shut down the national schools. The programme's courses had already been temporarily suspended and many of the students and faculty were participating in the protests. Thus, when faculty met to discuss whether or how to continue the programme, they had already been in conversation with students and each other about their experiences amidst the conflict. It was evident that invaluable learning was happening outside of the programme.

In addition to the ethics of keeping a non-state school open amidst all the state schools closing, the faculty discussed whether there was still any pedagogical or pragmatic value in keeping the programme open. After much discussion and reviewing the results from the polls, the majority of which requested that the programme remain open with optional classes, the faculty released a statement to the students claiming that there was a 'once in a lifetime opportunity to participate in and learn from the events unfolding' as a result of the coup, which called for 'profound leadership, compassion, and critical thinking.' The faculty go on to explain that they would 're-design [the] classes and activities so that they are connected to the events unfolding,' classes which should be regarded as 'flexible resources to help support the resistance.' One former faculty shared that advising became more hands-on: 'advisors were told to keep tabs on students and make sure they were healthy and doing okay' while they participated in 'the most important learning moment of everyone's lives.' This faculty stance aligned with the type of pragmatic, participatory experience advocated by the early 20th century American philosopher John Dewey (1997). This approach also created space for the students who were actively engaged in anti-military activities – which could be understood as agonistic as well as participatory democracy – to critically connect their experiences with school work and with the experiences and ideas of the rest of the multicultural learning community. Teachers who practice deliberative and participatory pedagogy have shown the value of manufactured conflict in classroom settings (Todd, 2008), but here the faculty and students saw the potential of real-life conflict as a valuable learning experience.

The alumni protests over the institution's official statement (see Table 4) could also be regarded as an example of students learning through agonistic conflict, in this case building on a broader societal moment to transform the programme's neoliberal policies. The alumni's agonistic protests against the institution evolved organically, and were not led by faculty. It is possible that the institution's participatory, deliberative decision-making structures contributed to these strategies of alumni. One former student and participant-researcher speculated this, connecting the agonistic culture created by the Military-Rule/Constitution exercise and the classroom emphasis on questioning everything with the alumni decision to push back against the institution's inaction: 'we talked about Marxism and different theories, but we weren't allowed to use or apply them at all. ...That's why some of my classmates resigned from being [alumni] representatives.' When they resigned from their positions as alumni representatives in protest against the institution's failure to speak out against the coup, former students saw themselves applying lessons learned in school.

One argument against agonistic theories of democratic education is that the focus on conflict and antagonism divides the world into black and white, obscuring situations when opponents are actually working towards similar goals. Perhaps, though, agonism can be seen as particularly useful and healthy in Myanmar, where historically the political discourse of 'unity' has been oppressive, functioning as a tool the elite uses to 'discipline' the population (Walton, 2015). In this case, agonistic alumni protests were productive, eventually causing the programme to shift towards more inclusive, online Burmese-language programming.

Educating through democracy

The findings suggest that some democratic philosophies can help institutions weather conflict.

For instance, the programme's deliberative and participatory structures – such as the community meeting, the faculty meeting and student ambassadors, and the faculty's advising of students – created a 'hidden curriculum' (Apple, 2019) that fostered participation which made the programme more resilient to the upheaval wrought by the coup. These structures emphasise teaching through democracy – for example, in the 'Military Rule' exercise, members of the learning community all practised using their voice and power in an artificial situation that soon enough recurred in the real world. Thus, it could be said that democratic education that teaches through democracy might strengthen community more than that which teaches for democracy or within democracy. A community strengthened through democracy is not only more resilient in times of crisis but may also serve as an end-in-itself of democratic education.

Author Bio

The Pyinnyarye Research Collective is a group of alumni, faculty and administrators who attended or worked at a community-based adult education program in Myanmar.

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