

Shifting spaces of resistance: Non-state education and anti-authoritarian resistance in exile



Elizabeth J.T. Maber, University of Cambridge, UK



ejtm2@cam.ac.uk



Ei Thin Zar, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA



thinzar@wisc.edu

Abstract

This paper explores the distinctive educational spaces created by exiled members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) as a site of resistance to authoritarianism in Myanmar. Drawing from empirical work conducted in 2022-3 in Mae Sot, Thailand, with 16 CDM participants, we examine the shifting dynamics of social relationships through the changing landscape of engagement with education. Building on conceptualisations from Deleuze and Guattari (2013), we discuss the oscillations and interactions of social space through the interplay of smoothing and striation that are reflected in these shifting dynamics and further exacerbated through the dislocation of displacement across borders. In so doing, we aim to explore a more complex picture of the dynamics of participation in the CDM in relation to education, and the shifting relationships between teachers, students and the state.

Key Words

non-state education, Thai border, civil disobedience, Myanmar military coup

Introduction

After a decade of, at least nominally, civilian leadership, the military coup of February 2021 once again returned Myanmar to authoritarian military rule. Alongside widespread public demonstrations and protests demonstrating vehement resistance, students and workers from diverse sectors across the country, including doctors, nurses and teachers, launched a civil disobedience movement (CDM) seeking to challenge the military and disrupt the operations of the illegitimate state.

In this article we explore the position of education in the CDM and the changing roles that teachers, students and activists have taken on in exile in Thailand. This study emerges from a wider project that has focused on the cross-border dimensions of community education responses to the new crises in Myanmar, where we want to understand how crisis and displacement work together in disrupting social and educational space¹. We have found that those who had taken a distinctly activist position in resisting the military coup through participation in the CDM were using the space of exile to continue their anti-authoritarian resistance through constructing and participating in alternative learning spaces that departed in both content and form from their previous experiences of education. This study therefore aimed to better understand these shifting roles that have prompted a renegotiation of the contribution of education in society and the relationships between the state, teachers and students.

Building on our previous work (e.g. Maber, 2016) we

To cite this article: Please change it to: Maber, E. J. T. and Zar, E. T. (2025). 'Shifting spaces of resistance: Non-state education and anti-authoritarian resistance in exile', *Education and Conflict Review*, 5, pp. 127-134.

¹ This ongoing project is supported by funding from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge and explores non-formal education amongst Myanmar communities in Thailand and Bangladesh.

suggest that conflict and displacement create radical and traumatic upheaval that results in an unsettling of social hierarchies. In this space of disruption, education is similarly loosened from many of the striated hierarchies which typically characterise schooling, creating distinctive education practices and relationships that contrast with government controlled formal education. Secondly, we apply the notion of *atopos*, being beyond or (perceived to be) out of place (Kennerly, 2021; McPherson, 2009), reflecting on the novel learning spaces that are being developed by teachers and students collectively in this border space. In so doing we aim to offer insights for learning about the possibilities and priorities of community-led education in conflict as a site of anti-authoritarian resistance.

Education and civil disobedience

In this paper, we use the term Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) as the specific non-violent resistance movement joined by the people of Myanmar in response to the military coup of 2021. It is recognised however that there are also armed movements that have emerged out of the protests, including the Peoples Defence Forces (PDF) and in many cases participants have taken part in both CDM and subsequent armed resistance movements.

Teachers have been particularly active in the CDM and over 300,000 teachers, roughly three quarters of Myanmar's state sector teachers, have participated, refusing to return to government schools under military control (Reuters, 2021). Likewise, in the immediate aftermath of the coup teachers, often accompanied by their students, were prominent participants in protests in towns across the country wearing their distinctive green and white uniforms to make visible their professional, as well as personal, resistance (Frontier, 2021). This withdrawal of teaching labour from the military state, and the visibility of their resistance, is indicative of the changing political landscape of education and its impact in shifting alignments and dynamics of control between government administration, teaching workforce and students (Maber *et al.*, 2022).

Underscoring both their resistance to the military regime and their solidarity with their students, many teachers have sought since the coup to engage with education in different ways beyond the state, teaching informally or establishing parallel opposition

schools. Consequently, teachers, students and education sites have increasingly become targets of military assault, with the result that many have fled Myanmar across the border to Thailand. The Thai-Myanmar border regions have long provided a refuge for communities fleeing conflict in Myanmar who have established a variety of education responses to cater to the needs of migrant and refugee learners. Students and teachers fleeing the current violence have joined these communities in seeking to develop alternative education spaces beyond the influence of the authoritarian state. However, these individuals, especially young trainees and recently qualified teachers, have experienced education within Myanmar differently to those communities who have been in Thailand for decades, and as a result are creating distinctive education responses.

This study therefore aimed to better understand CDM participants' reflections on their evolving relationship with education, including their participation in the CDM, shifting relationships with the state, and their continued commitment to educational practice even within the turbulent and traumatic context of displacement.

Collective action, assemblage and spaces of anti-authoritarian activism

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1988), we conceptualise the shifting configurations of social relations and power dynamics as forms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization within the interplay of shifting social spaces. These social configurations are reformed and operate within the shifting dynamics of social space which can be understood through the interplay between striation and smoothing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Striation can be understood as hierarchical, boundaried social space and as such is emblematic of state control and regimes of power (Bayne, 2004). In educational terms, formal state education spaces often typify striated space through the delineation of learning into age-based classes punctuated by points of assessment to determine progression (Maber, 2018). The amorphous nature of smooth spaces, characterised by fluidity and flux, can be seen to intercede and undermine striation, creating moments of disruption (Youdell and Armstrong, 2011). Because of this turbulence, smooth space may be a site of conflict and discomfort, but also creation

and transformation (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Likewise, smooth space may be associated with a loosening of state influence and control, reflected in the distinctive dynamics of borderlands and displacement (Maber, 2016). Here, as elsewhere, the smooth and the striated are in constant tension and dialogue, resulting in friction between these spaces which can produce new configurations and lines of flight (Braidotti, 2011; Boylan and Woolsey, 2015).

Protest and resistance movements in response to military or police crackdowns, we argue, are a tangible, physical enactment of the tension between striation and smoothing, producing reconfigurations of assemblages, and reflecting the violence that can occur at this disjuncture. The dynamics of social movements, especially in opposition to the extremes of hierarchical striation represented by military authoritarianism, can be read as smooth spaces of transformation and reconfiguration offering resistance to reterritorialization. CDM participants who are now exiled on the border, especially teachers and students who were previously actively engaged with the formal education system within Myanmar, navigate the distinctive turbulence of these multiple transitions, from stability to displacement and from defined roles within the educational hierarchy to a fluidity of learning and unlearning. As explored further below, this leads us to the notion of *atopos*, as exiled CDM teachers and students find themselves 'out of place' in their expected roles.

Methodology

The empirical work that this study builds on was conducted in Mae Sot, Thailand, in 2022-23 through a series of workshops and group discussions with 16 CDM participants who had fled Myanmar in the year following the coup. Drawing on existing personal and professional networks in Mae Sot, a snowball approach was used to reach out to CDM participants who had been connected to education within Myanmar and who were willing to share their experiences and thoughts together in workshop-style discussions. This approach enabled mutual trust to be established amongst the group and ensured that we were able to include individuals who may not have had much previous contact with NGOs in the border region. The group comprised: 4 Basic Education Teachers from Mon, Karen and Bago regions; 9 university/post-high school students

from Karen, Sagaing, Bago, Mon and Tanintharyi regions; and 3 civil servants from Karen and Yangon. Participants were all under the age of 30 and were a mix of men, women and gender non-binary, with different religious affiliations (Buddhist, Muslim and Christian). All had participated in the CDM and some had also joined armed resistance groups.

The individuals in the group had not previously known each other before reaching Mae Sot, but now found themselves drawn together through shared commitments to educational, knowledge-sharing and journalism work as a way of continuing their anti-authoritarian resistance. In this the group exemplified the new points of contact and social configurations that emerge in smooth spaces of flux and dislocation.

Reflecting ethical imperatives to create supportive, nurturing research environments in the context of conflict and displacement, the research drew on the authors' longstanding personal and professional commitments in Myanmar and the Thai border. The workshops were facilitated by Ei in Burmese and drew on techniques of citizen journalism to give participants control of the direction of the study, taking a mixed media approach that incorporated peer interviewing, art and photography, drama and documentaries. Citizen journalism, which draws on journalistic techniques of inquiry and multi-media use (Randall 2000) has become a popular method for those in Myanmar's anti-authoritarian resistance to share their experiences and make visible the violence of the state to a wider audience (Aung 2024; Brooten *et al.* 2019).

Taking a co-constructed and participatory approach (Özerdem and Bowd 2010), the participants in the research together decided a form of media they wanted as the outcome in each workshop, and then they framed the workshop accordingly. Each workshop produced content in one form of media such as news reports, interview articles, poems, paintings, short documentaries, and drama. These were analysed inductively to identify cross-cutting themes. The perspectives cited here draw from the interviews and group discussions in the workshops which focused on experiences of and motivations for participating in the CDM and experiences of education before and after the coup, which correlate with the other creative elements of the study. All participants are anonymised and referred to through pseudonyms.

Shifting relationships with the State: between striation and smoothing

The experience of displacement and fleeing violence, imprisonment and military assaults is undeniably traumatic and the research participants spoke of their emotional disjuncture and disillusionment in the aftermath of the coup with their lives being uprooted (and under threat). For students and civil servants, the military coup prompted a radical interruption to their life course, as May, a CDM participant from the financial sector, reflected:

I already had a settled life before the coup. I had a position and I was taking part time MBA courses. But, after the coup, the school closed and everything changed. In this situation, I had no choice but to become a journalist.

For some, especially those who may have previously felt less secure within the striations of gendered and racialised nationalist discourses of the state (including religious minority and LGBTQ+ members of the group), the upheaval created by displacement has created alternative possibilities that were otherwise risky. One young Muslim graduate highlighted, 'I am interested in writing and painting which I have never really pursued as a career' (Ye). After the coup he joined the CDM and protested on the streets until he joined the armed resistance movement. He was subsequently injured by a landmine and was brought to the Thai border for treatment, deciding to stay in Mae Sot with others who took refuge in a safe house. There he met artists and attended art training, then presented his paintings in art exhibitions to sell and donate for internally displaced people in Myanmar.

The teachers in the group however, while also experiencing this traumatic upheaval, pointed to a different form of rupture with the state in the aftermath of the coup. Having participated and invested in supporting the authority of the democratic state through the education reforms, through the COVID pandemic and through election monitoring, teachers felt an acute betrayal with the rhetoric accompanying the coup. Many teachers had served as monitors and polling officers at the polling stations throughout the country during the elections of late 2020 and were outraged that the military used the pretext of election fraud as a justification for seizing power, as one teacher

indicated: 'I volunteered at an election polling station for the 2020 election. It was an insult to accuse that there was fraud' (Nway Oo). Likewise, another teacher, Nayyaung, reflected on the disillusionment resulting from the political breakdown and the breakdown in trust:

When I first heard about the military regime seizing power on February 1st, I couldn't believe it. No one could have imagined it happening. They cited election fraud as a reason which deeply upset me at that time. I worked as a chief polling officer at that election and put in tremendous effort to ensure everything went smoothly. About two weeks before the election day, I dedicated myself to learning the procedures, even keeping the election manual under my pillow while sleeping. So, it was heartbreaking to hear about the coup.

The teachers we spoke to articulated a distinctive dimension to the breakdown of trust and sense of betrayal in the immediate aftermath of the coup, while also grappling with a continued sense of duty and service to their students and wider community. Nway Oo continued:

But, I can't give up contributing to my society as a teacher. Currently, I am teaching English for beginner and intermediate level students online, giving livelihood training on how to start small businesses, and producing podcasts about LGBTQ communities in Burma.

Once again, as reflected in this quote above, CDM participants highlighted the shift in social configurations accompanying deterritorialisation and the loosening of the hierarchies of straited institutions that had allowed them to be more confident in advocating for gender diversity and LGBTQ+ recognition in the smooth activist spaces of the borders. In turn, this borderland space prompts a renegotiation of the roles and purpose of education.

'I understand that I knew nothing before': educational reorientations

The disentangling of education from a perception of duty towards the state is a reflection of smoothing that intercedes with the striated nature of much compulsory basic education. This process had begun prior to the coup through a series of education reforms that had been solidified through the National

Education Strategic Plan in 2017 which had sought to modernise schooling and teaching techniques, moving away from a reliance on rote memorisation and reproduction (Shah, Aung, and Lopes Cardozo, 2019). This likewise repositioned teachers from being seen as sole authority within the classroom to a facilitator of their students' learning, contributing to the closer alignment between teachers and students which was evident in the initial protests (Maber *et al*, 2022). The shared experience of resistance further dissolved the traditional hierarchies of these educational relationships, creating smooth spaces of solidarity and collaboration.

CDM teachers articulated a form of awakening that led them to question how they had previously thought about education and their role in relation to notions of service, duty and the expectations of what education should be. Mi, a teacher from Mon State, reflected:

I thought 'education' can only be acquired from school, but after the coup, I realized that education is not just about school. I have to unlearn and it has changed my perspectives on thinking about things.

Expanding on her experiences of teaching and learning before and after the coup, Mi continued to describe this period of personal change and re-evaluation of what it means to be a teacher in this moment of rupture:

After I joined the CDM, I felt unsafe to be at home. I want to do more for the revolution. Before the coup, I was just a teacher and comfortable. I used to not have any social life or network outside of my work. Now, I am learning many things. I understand that I knew nothing before. It is a form of education. What I wanted to do and what I do is not that different. I keep sharing what I have learned.

These articulations of their previous role before the coup as just a teacher betrays a feeling of limitation and a new awareness of boundaries which have been loosened in the turbulent post-coup landscape – even while they continue to share their learning in this new space, there is now a sense that this offers a more substantial social contribution.

The combination of the smooth space of anti-authoritarian resistance and the dislocation of place, being displaced across the border in Thailand,

therefore creates a distinctive dynamic for CDM teachers in Mae Sot within these resistance movements as they reformulate their role beyond the state they had traditionally been expected to serve. This creates an educational atopia – a space 'out of place' – where, as Kennerly indicates, '[t]he juxtaposition a/topos acknowledges not only that one or one's kind is not included, but also that exclusions force or allow to develop certain ways of seeing and being that are not available to people who occupy dominant social and actual spaces by cultural default' (Kennerly 2021, 61). In contrast to the notion of utopia, the atopia is not an ideal, desired, or sought-out space of existence, yet it can be productive, just as new configurations emerge within the turbulence and disruption of smoothing.

Re-imagining education in atopia

Previous work has drawn attention to the marginalising effect of Myanmar's basic education sector through which social exclusions have been replicated and reinforced as well as the limited avenues for independent thought and personal development (Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012; Lopes Cardozo and Maber 2019; Lall 2020; Suante 2024). Students and civil servants in the group likewise articulated this reflection and re-evaluation of their experiences of education and learning in Myanmar prior to the coup, alongside an awareness of their reformulation of the purpose of education. As Yoe, a former civil servant in the environmental sector, indicated:

I think Myanmar's education system did not give us knowledge, but memorization. It's good that people can read and write through that education. [But] I think we should be able to learn more than just to read and write.

Likewise, Tun, a student activist and previously a student union leader, reflected this desire to recreate a form of education that will serve new goals for the desired outcome of resistance:

Here, sometimes, I feel like the knowledge and skills I learned before are not very useful here. I had to start learning, especially I am learning human rights, child rights, minority rights for after the revolutionary time when we rebuild our community. I think what I am learning is and will be useful for the transitional justice period.

And similarly amongst the teachers in the group, there was evident disengagement with prior structures of education while voicing a commitment to creating new learning environments that support positive social change, as Htet expressed: 'If I can't change Burma's education system, at least I want to change and teach people around me.'

This commitment to creating new educational spaces reflects possibilities for new assemblages of learning to emerge in atopolis. As Kennerly highlights: 'Atopolis tends to be constructive and creative when it is a self-attribution that anticipates and thereby manages the reactions of those most likely to police social space for violations' (Kennerly 2021, 55). In this educational atopia, learners (CDM students, teachers, and activists alike) pursue the courses and classes that are available to them, based on their existing and newfound interests formed through their post-coup experiences. For participants in the research group, these included: rights-based courses on human rights, migrant rights, minority rights, and statelessness; information technology courses such as digital literacy, digital security, content creating, photoshop, journalism; teacher training courses, environmental and conservation courses, language courses, and mental health courses. The education providers that are accessible to them are non-state and non-profits, particularly, self-organized providers that emerged in the post-coup context. While it is not without challenges in the accessibility of resources and navigating the competing agendas that may always infiltrate smooth dynamics, this DIY approach to constructing learning offers a more personalised sense of the desired contribution of education.

Likewise, the juxtapositions and new encounters in this turbulent space have allowed for new understandings and solidarities to crystallise across previously imposed social hierarchies. The historical Burmanisation of Myanmar's national education had previously sought to assert the dominance of Burmese language, Burman history highlighting Burman heroes, and Buddhist religion (Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012). As a result, current graduates of national education have largely not been provided with multicultural and multilingual practices. However, in this borderland atopia, cultural exchanges were observed which reflect the new encounters characteristic of smooth space. For example, participants shared that since arriving

in Mae Sot they had learned about each other's regions, languages, cultural practices, ways of saying things even in Burmese, ways of building houses, different names for the same food and different games they played. The unlearning and learning, akin to processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, were noted as the process of educating themselves and each other, redefining what Myanmar as a country might be understood to be.

Concluding reflections

In nature this was an exploratory study which aimed to be guided by the participants in the forms of dialogue, knowledge-sharing and media that they wished to engage in. While there are limitations in this approach, particularly in the potentially limited universality of these experiences, nonetheless this offered an opportunity to reflect on the shifting dynamics of social space and learning in exile. Participants expressed their motivations for taking part in the CDM, as well as their motivations for continuing to engage with education while in exile, highlighting a desire for new forms of learning connections and attention to what they identified as essential for the eventual reconstruction of a more inclusive state. This included a focus on the perceived lack of relevance of previous experiences of education, particularly amongst students, and a positioning of education, particularly amongst teachers, as offering an opportunity to work towards change even while its form may be transformed in the atopian space of the borderland.

Through these perspectives of CDM participants in exile, education in Myanmar is clearly implicated in the maintenance of straited social hierarchies that have allowed a perpetuation of cycles of domination and exclusion. Teachers and students are integral to maintaining (and also therefore potentially undermining) the hierarchical structures of formal state-led basic education through the roles that they embody and enact, and the dynamics of their relationships within the educational structure. Yet through the disruption of conflict, exile and rejecting state control over the educational narrative, the CDM participants we worked with were demonstrating their resistance not only to the military coup but also to the misuse of education as a weapon of the state against its diverse populace. In opposing this

co-opting of education, CDM teachers and students have joined other activists in contributing to the smooth social space of anti-authoritarian resistance. In the borderlands however, this dislocation with the state is accentuated creating a new space for atopian education to emerge in this space 'out of place' that offers possibilities for reconfiguring alternative forms of learning across the life course.

Author bios

Elizabeth J.T. Maber is Associate Professor in Sociology of Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

Ei Thin Zar is a Myanmar activist and educator who has recently completed her PhD at University Wisconsin-Madison.

References:

- Aung, T. T. (2024). *Under the junta's shadow: The rise of citizen journalism in Myanmar*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/under-juntas-shadow-rise-citizen-journalism-myanmar> (Accessed: 19 April, 2025).
- Bayne, S. (2004). 'Smoothness and striation in digital learning spaces', *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 1(2), pp. 302–316.
- Boylan, M., and Woolsey, I. (2015). 'Teacher education for social justice: Mapping identity spaces', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 46, pp. 62–71.
- Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic subjects embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Brooten, L., McElhone, J. M., and Venkiteswaran, G. (Eds.). (2019). *Myanmar media in transition: Legacies, challenges and change*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1988). *A thousand plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Frontier. (2021, June 15). 'Teachers, students keep protests alive in 'f***ing stubborn' Monywa' *Frontier Myanmar*, 15 June. Available at: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/teachers-students-keep-protests-alive-in-fing-stubborn-monywa/> (Accessed: 19 April, 2025).
- Kennerly, M. (2021). Atopos. In *A New Handbook of Rhetoric: Inverting the Classical Vocabulary* (pp. 53–70). Penn State University Press.
- Lall, M. (2020). *Myanmar's education reforms: A pathway to social justice?* UCL Press.
- Lopes Cardozo, M.T.A. and Maber, E.J.T. (eds.) (2019). *Sustainable peacebuilding and social justice in times of transition: findings on the role of education in Myanmar*. Springer.
- Maber, E.J.T. (2016). 'Cross-border transitions: navigating conflict and political change through community education practices in Myanmar and the Thai border', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 14(3), pp 374–389.
- Maber, E., Khin, M. A., Hla, W. M. O., and May, W. (2022). *The precarious politics of teacher education in Myanmar*, in *The Handbook of Research on Teacher Education: Innovations and Practices in Asia*. Springer.
- Mcpherson, A. (2009). 'From utopia to atopia to diaspora? — Narratives of social (re-)organization in a German refugee home', *Matatu*, 36(1), pp 363–375.
- Özerdem, A., and Bowd, R. (2010). *Participatory research methodologies: Development and post-disaster/conflict reconstruction*. Taylor and Francis Group.
- Randall, D. (2000). *The universal journalist*. Pluto Press.
- Reuters. (2021). *Myanmar's military rulers suspend more than 125,000 teachers for opposing coup*. *The Guardian*, 23 May. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/23/myanmars-military-rulers-suspend-more-than-125000-teachers-for-opposing-coup> (Accessed: 19 April, 2025).
- Salem-Gervais, N., and Metro, R. (2012). 'A textbook case of nation-building: The evolution of history curricula in Myanmar', *Journal of Burma Studies*, 16(1) pp 27–78.

Shah, R., Aung, K.M., and Lopes Cardozo, M. (2019). Education and policy challenges in a situation of flux. In: Lopes Cardozo, M.T.A. and Maber, E.J.T. (eds.) *Sustainable Peacebuilding and Social Justice in Times of Transition: Findings on the role of education in Myanmar*, pp 87-113. Springer.

Shimizu, I., San, M., Latt, K.L., and Naing, T. (2020). *Preparing to reopen schools better in Myanmar*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/stories/preparing-reopen-schools-better-myanmar> (Accessed: 19 April, 2025).

Suante, K. T. T. (2024). 'The history and politics of schooling in Myanmar', *Paedagogica Historica*, 60(2), pp 191–208.

Youdell, D., and Armstrong, F. (2011). 'A politics beyond subjects: The affective choreographies and smooth spaces of schooling', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 4(3), pp 144-150.