



Creativity in Crisis: Re-envisioning Higher Education in Myanmar's Spring Revolution

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Abstract In the spring of 2022, we (a teacher–educator from the USA and a Kachin graduate research assistant) interviewed 14 participants from Myanmar who were engaging in an unprecedented educational re-imagining during the Spring Revolution following the 2021 military coup that gripped the county. Three preliminary findings of our study focus on creativity in crisis in higher education, which we categorized as actors, actions, and procedures, or who, what, and how. ‘Who’ refers to actors and their creativity in forming new alliances among inter-ethnic and inter-generational educators and activists to remake education. ‘What’ refers to creativity in content in addressing inequity and ‘fake history’ in the national curriculum. ‘How’ addresses creativity in the delivery of education in the midst of extreme challenges and opposition. This look into the way crises can lead to creativity in education, with a focus on higher education, presents a unique opportunity to witness how grassroots actors in Myanmar are seeking to transform higher education in a ‘radical bureaucratic overhaul,’ as one participant put it, making it more inclusive, critical, and just.

Keywords Myanmar · Burma · Higher education · Education in emergencies · Social justice

We need to change the entire generation through education so that social justice and peace education can successfully permeate into our society. In this case, I would say education is the most important weapon to conquer injustice. (S8)

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Introduction

In his article ‘Creativity in Conflict Zones,’ Canagarajah (2021) encourages readers to reflect upon creative pursuits developed during traumatic conditions as this could yield valuable lessons. He states,

For many of us, life in the conflict zone is often off-limits for reflection or contemplation. Some are in denial, as we don’t want to acknowledge the injustices and inhumanity we experienced. It is too painful to relive those events. [. . .] But it is important to reflect on those experiences as there are lessons for us, for our children, and perhaps for outsiders beyond our community. (p. 1)

Canagarajah (2021) found that living in conflict zones can foster creativity, noting ‘there are experiences of vulnerability, pain, and suffering that accompany everyone’s creative enterprises’ (p. 1). The response of educators to the 2011 coup in Myanmar is an example of how creativity can be found in crisis and is where we now turn.

Background of Burma/Myanmar

At first glance, one of the last places one might expect to find creativity in higher education is in Myanmar’s public education system. Known as Burma until 1989, Myanmar has one of lowest budgets for education in the world and is notorious for its outdated, non-inclusive, rote-learning style of national education. The military-controlled government has used ‘slave education’ (Metro, 2021) to indoctrinate its people for seven decades with ‘fake history’ that ignores and seems to want to erase the linguistic and ethnic diversity of its people. From 2011 to 2021, it appeared that the grip of

the military was easing with new political leadership and proposed education reforms, however, that came to abrupt halt in February 2021 when the military Junta overthrew the lawfully elected National League of Democracy (NLD) government and unleashed violence on its people. The people revolted and teachers and students boycotted schools. By June of 2021, it was estimated that 90% of college instructors had left their positions to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) (Frontier Myanmar, June 8, 2021; January 17, 2022a), many going into hiding or exile, where a shadow government, the National Unity Government (NUG), and parallel higher education systems that are critical, inclusive, and free of military control started emerging. Creativity was found in crisis as people united in what some call the Myanmar Spring Revolution.

Myanmar is the largest of the mainland Southeast Asian states. India and Bangladesh are on its western border, and China, Thailand, and Laos are on the North and East borders. Myanmar has 14 provinces comprising seven divisions and seven states, the latter named for the non-Burman ethnic groups who reside in those regions (Mon, Kayin, Rakhine, Kayah, Shan, Chin, and Kachin States). Myanmar is rich with natural resources, including its diverse cultures and languages, but is perhaps best known for having the longest civil war in history. Non-Burman ethnic groups have suffered for decades from oppression under military rule. Buddhism is supported by the state in many ways and is the majority religion of Myanmar (close to 90 percent claim to be Buddhist). Other religions are practiced in Myanmar, such as Christianity, the majority religion among the Chin and Kachin, and Islam, the majority religion of the Rohingya. Animists and Hindus, each make up less than 1 percent of the nation's roughly 54 million people.

While there have been brief periods of civilian rule in Myanmar, such as after independence from the British in 1948 following two decades of colonial rule and the emerging democracy taking shape from 2011 to 2021, these periods ended with the military taking back control. The gains made with the emerging democracy in Myanmar in the second decade of this century, came to an end on February 1, 2021 when the military junta staged a coup. In the first phase of the coup, the junta arrested many legally elected NLD officials. After one year, the number of detained citizens was over 12,000 and those killed over 1500 (AAPP, 2022), many who were protesting peacefully on the streets during the early months of the anti-coup movement. This coup, like the two that came before it in 1962 and 1988, has had a devastating impact on all sectors of society. However, unlike the previous coups, this one has resulted in a revolution, with active participation from students, health providers, teachers, and citizens who envision a new Myanmar.

The history of education in Myanmar is complex. Myanmar once held the distinction of having one of the top

universities in all of Southeast Asia, Yangon (Rangoon) University (Lall, 2016) with English as the medium of instruction in many subjects. But after five decades of isolation and neglect of its education sector, Myanmar's economy and education budgets were ranked among the lowest in the world. Before the 2021 coup, reforms in education were underway, with millions of dollars from international organizations supporting large-scale education sector reviews and revisions. These reforms were sorely needed, but critics felt the reforms did not go far enough, and did not reflect the rich diversity of Myanmar that had been ignored in the previous nationalistic curriculum. In response to the inadequate education provided by the government, many ethnic groups in Myanmar living in the remote areas had established ethnic-based education systems in which they could use their home languages to teach about their own histories. Even in urban areas, educational alternatives to military-backed education were created by local and international actors who provided alternative educational opportunities.

It can be said that education in Myanmar falls within three spheres: state-led education, which educates the majority of students; ethnic-based education (South & Lall, 2016a, 2016b), conducted mostly in minority languages; and civil society-based education, led by local citizens and sometimes supported by international actors. The most notable and creative forms of higher education in Myanmar before the 2021 coup are those created and administered by Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Several ethnic-based education systems are well established in many parts of Myanmar and unlike state-supported schools, many opt for more learner-centered pedagogy, often using mother tongue-based multilingual education approaches. Their success is notable given the lack of state support and resources and the constant threat of providing education in conflict zones.

The 2021 Coup and Its Impact on Myanmar

In the aftermath of the military coup in Myanmar during the spring of 2021, many sectors of society united in protest, including the medical community, students, teachers, factory workers, clerks, and citizens. What makes this uprising unique is that many who are from Bama majority have joined the resistance, aligning with other ethnic groups in solidarity, to take a stand against the unlawful military junta. Seeing the violence that the military unleashed on common citizens in urban areas, many of the Bama majority have now been 'unlocked' as one participant put it, with enhanced sensitivity to the violence that non-Burman ethnic groups in remote areas have been experiencing for decades. 'Now they know' as one participant put it, 'what we have been experiencing for seven

decades' (S10). Many citizens, community leaders, and members of civil society organizations (CSOs) supported the thousands of teachers and others in the CDM to oppose the coup, some actively participating in the newly emerging shadow government, the NUG.

The impact of the February 1, 2021 military coup on education in Myanmar is substantial. In June 2021, over 139,000 K-12 and higher education educators, who took part in CDM were dismissed from their teaching positions, with many in hiding to evade being arrested (Frontier Myanmar, June 8, 2021). In addition, over 19,000 university professors were dismissed for joining the CDM and had to leave their homes on campus and work from undisclosed locations seeking to support their students however they could. In the summer of 2021, dismissed university faculty would be arrested if they tried to teach online due to their participation in CDM. As few as 10% of students returned to schools in June 2021 (Metro, 2021), hoping their boycott would demonstrate their resolve in seeking democracy and social justice in Myanmar. A year later in June 2022, reports from the Junta indicated that only half of K-12 students (5.2 million) were registered for school nationwide. Many who register did not attend classes (Frontier Fridays, June 3, 2022b), so the negative impact of the coup on education is continuing.

In response to this, the people of Myanmar established a parallel government and began to develop new and alternative education systems. The educational re-designers are several: teachers' and students' unions, the NUG, ethnic nationalities' education departments, non-profit organizations, civil society groups, international organizations, and overseas scholars invited to participate in the educational transformation by the NUG. The content of these reimagined education systems is both inclusive and critical, in sharp contrast to the military-backed nationalism promoted in government schools. The hope of transformation of the educational landscape of Myanmar is real and is taking place in many forms. Metro (2021) states that if these emerging innovative and collaborative educational systems succeed, education in Myanmar can become a driver of change. This collaborative vision of a new alternative, more socially just education system is a prime example of creativity in demonstrating how people in Myanmar can come together across generational, ethnic, religious, regional, and economic differences to accomplish a common goal for the greater good. It is these activists, educators, and peace workers, who this study seeks to learn from in their efforts to re-envision higher education in Myanmar.

A recent report of higher education providers in post-coup Myanmar provides more context, with findings from interviews and focus groups of over 50 key informants and data from over 2500 surveys of students and teachers (Spring University Myanmar, 2023). They list five key interim

education providers (IEPs) that offered education following the coup:

1. Ethnic Education Departments.
2. Online Education Platforms.
3. Interim University Councils and Students' Unions.
4. Ministries under the National Unity Government (NUG).
5. Community Initiatives in Conflict Areas.

They state that of these five, only Ethnic Education Departments were established pre-coup. These were well-established offering post-secondary campus-based education programs that granted certificates, diplomas, and bachelor's degrees in fields such as Social Sciences, Computer Sciences, Public Administration and Governance, Federalism, Peace and Conflict Studies, and STEM. The list of ethnic groups with established colleges includes Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Kayan, Shan, Lahu, Mon, Pa-O, and Ta'ang. Our study had participants from all but one of these five IEPs and had participants representing at least six of the ethnic groups listed. A key finding of their report is that participation of CDM university teachers in these interim education systems was relatively low given their large number, which might be due to personal issues, intermittent internet connectivity, power outages, or security concerns. (See the SUM 2023 report for more information.)

Methods

The Researchers

The two researchers in this study provide an insider/outsider perspective and bring different expertise and experiences that made the study possible. The second author is a Myanmar citizen, a Kachin from Myitkyina, and a graduate student who was enrolled in a Master's program at the start of the inquiry. He brought to this study the ability to conduct interviews in English, Burmese, Jinghpaw, and Hka Hku. His network of close relationships with key actors in Myanmar within educational institutions, activist groups, and various ethnic communities provided access to key participants. Trust is crucial when interviewing participants and especially when they are activists. His years of living in a conflict zone in northern Myanmar and his lived experience during the coup in Myanmar from February until August 2021 right before he came to the USA to complete his MA degree provides legitimacy to the study. His connections afforded access to key participants and his experiences provided them the trust needed to tell their stories. His perspective of what it is like to be oppressed and on the run, and what it means to experience a coup, added nuance and context to our analysis.

The first author is a teacher educator and was a 2015–2016 Fulbright Scholar at Yangon University. She has researched and written about Myanmar's linguistic and ethnic diversity (Wong, 2017), English language teaching in Myanmar (Wong et al., 2019), its language-in-education policies (Wong, 2019), and teaching for peace and social justice in Myanmar (Wong, 2022a, 2022b). She brings experience in international qualitative research and a desire to promote social justice through education in Myanmar. The study was conducted during her spring 2022 sabbatical with an additional small grant from her university. The authors' teacher/student relationship developed into one of co-researchers, solidified after David's graduation the spring of 2022.

The Research Questions

The research questions in this study focused on the participants' experience during the February 1, 2021 coup and the impact that the coup and the resulting Spring Revolution is having on higher education in Myanmar. Our research examined the emerging educational alternative spaces being formed at this critical juncture. We interviewed activists, educators, students, researchers, and NUG and community leaders engaged in re-imagining education. We asked about how already established forms of alternative education systems, namely ethnic-based educational systems among the Mon, Karen, Kachin, and Chin were impacted, and how other creative forms of innovation in higher education were emerging, such as virtual higher education and third spaces, created to avoid education using curriculum from the military-backed regime. This inquiry into how a crisis can lead to creativity in higher education presented a unique opportunity to rethink the purpose of higher education, redesign its content, and rework its processes to transform who higher education ultimately benefits.

Procedures

We conducted this study remotely from southern California through Zoom and Facebook Messenger interviews with 14 participants who were involved in education in Myanmar. Some of the participants were in exile (in the USA or Thailand), and some in liberated areas or in safe undisclosed locations in Myanmar. IRB approval was granted from Azusa Pacific University, and informed consent forms and interview guides were translated into Burmese and checked for accuracy. Both researchers had successfully completed courses offered by the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification required by their university's ethics board. Both researchers were present at the majority of interviews. Participants chose which language to use in the interviews. Four

interviews were conducted in Burmese, two in a combination of English and Burmese and eight in English.

After we conducted 14 interviews with an equal gender balance from a range of ethnic backgrounds and roles, we felt we had enough data and perspectives to adequately address our questions. Data analysis was ongoing, taking place during and after the interviews from January to June 2022. During the data analysis we created over 375 codes and sorted them into 12 categories. We listened to the interviews several times, while reading and coding the transcripts, merging and splitting codes when appropriate, and seeking to find responses to our inquiry on the impact of the Spring Revolution on higher education. We met each week for two hours to ensure we understood the participants' responses by discussing our codes, memos, and insights and discussing questions or concerns. We also shared, read, and discussed numerous related articles on the coup and education in Myanmar. On a few occasions, we emailed participants follow-up questions to confirm we understood their responses. We also said we would try to provide them access to any resulting publications and sought out open-source publications for ease of access for the people of Myanmar.

Participants

We used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants. More specifically, we recruited participants by emailing personal contacts who had connections to education in Myanmar. After we described our study, we asked if they would like to be interviewed or if they could introduce us to someone who might have insights related to our inquiry, provided they were over 18 and in a safe location for a Zoom interview. We sought out a diversity of participants in terms of age range, ethnicity, gender, perspective, and role. Since this research took place around the one-year anniversary of the February 1, 2021 coup, we attended several webinars conducted by numerous universities (Yale, Harvard, Teachers College, Columbia University, etc.) which hosted panels of presenters who were Myanmar activists in exile. We contacted some of the panelists and a few were willing to be interviewed and/or provided introductions to other key actors to interview.

Four of the 14 participants identified themselves as Kachin, four as Burmese (some with additional Shan or Chinese heritage), three as Chin, two as Karen, and one as Mon. Participants identified themselves with overlapping roles, including teachers, curriculum developers, NUG members, leaders in government, CDM members, activists, revolutionaries, scholars, students, and researchers. We sought to provide at least one quote from each of the 14 participants.

Results: Findings on Creativity

Creativity is defined as ‘the interaction between aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context’ (Plucker et al., 2004, p. 90). Traditional definitions of creativity include both originality (or novelty) and task appropriateness (or usefulness). Terms associated with creativity found with a simple online search of the term include choice, discovery, joy, risk, imagination, and an out-of-the-box solution to a problem in a specific context. The opposite of creativity is when students are provided word-for-word answers from their teachers to memorize and recite in a competition between schools and in on high stakes exams and when students are penalized for providing their own ideas on exams instead of those teachers had asked them to memorize which has been found in state-run education systems in Myanmar (Wong et al., 2019). In a creative approach to teaching, instead of providing one right answer, teachers seek to foster curiosity and discovery, to encourage risk and mistakes, to allow for choice in assignments, and to help students’ imaginations to flourish. Teachers can employ creative pedagogical approaches that seek to instill creative thinking in students by rewarding and assessing creative thinking and solutions among students. In addition, administrators can apply creative solutions in the development, delivery, and management of education. Thus, creativity in education is not limited to what a teacher does in the classroom or to student learning outcomes to think and work out creative (i.e., novel and useful) solutions to problems, but can also be applied to the establishment and running of educational institutions and initiatives.

Change is difficult, and sometimes it takes a crisis to force a change. As one participant in our study noted, ‘We cannot waste this crisis. [...] Now is the best time to create the different educational curricula which are intentionally designed for all of the ethnicities in Myanmar and provide a sense of inclusion’ (S8). In crisis creativity can bloom. The following sections outline some of our findings which we have organized into creativity in terms of who builds and benefits from education, what is included in the curriculum, and how education is delivered.

Who: Creativity in New Roles and Forming Alliances to Reimagine Higher Education

Analysis of the data found creativity in crisis in terms of the actors themselves, notably, who determines what education is, who it serves, who generates the curriculum, and who teaches. In our study on education during the crisis in Myanmar, we found stakeholders taking on new identities and roles, such as college students becoming curriculum

developers, young people becoming administrators, teachers becoming government leaders, and scholars becoming activists. In total, we had 13 codes under ‘who’ which refers to actors who engaged in creativity gleaned from our analysis of the 14 interviews. These codes included creativity in:

- educators joining online international communities of practice
- institutional collaborations with international universities
- educators reaching out to international alumni
- emerging educational sites hiring students to rebuild education
- emerging educational sites hiring unemployed CDM teachers to teach new students
- student unions creating free education
- student-led reforms in education
- students and teachers forming armed resistance groups
- teachers serving under-resourced groups
- teacher/activist collaborations
- urban teachers volunteering to teach rural communities
- teachers, students, and parents forming networks and coalitions
- regional universities forming agreements to accept/recognize one another’s degrees

Many actors took on new roles due to the coup and Spring Revolution. In the following quote, a professor notes his transition from a scholar to activist.

For me, my previous understanding is that a scholar has to write. That is the basic task of being a scholar. We have to write, we have to publish, but when I experienced the rise of the coup, I felt that that was not sufficient. We cannot simply write what we know or what we think in the paper or in the articles, we really need to step out of that comfortable zone and then go into the public lives and engage with the grassroots people. We need these people and then do it together, bring out their voices when you write, and then you could also be their advocate as a speaker. So, this is how I see myself as a scholar, advocate, or maybe an activist. (S7)

Many of the tens of thousands striking CDM teachers fled their homes in fear of being arrested and were now without a means to support themselves. They were left extremely vulnerable, but demonstrated remarkable resilience. New alternative educational systems were being formed, and many CDM teachers were being hired to teach in them, whether it was online or community-organized classes located in students’ homes. Thus, teachers were changing their roles from teaching the state-run curriculum to replacing it with a curriculum they designed in the new system. As one participant said, ‘Now, we

have CDM teachers, and we can apply their workforce in the field of creating the best possible educational curriculums which are intended for different ethnicities and backgrounds' (S8).

The leading role of education and of teachers and students in the revolution is described by this participant:

This revolution involved education as well. Very strong resistance from education sectors, by CDM teachers, university students, and CDM students. Many of the students are Gen-Z and very strong. They are the pillar of this revolution. Students and parents are resisting the [state] education system. There's a very strong resistance going on in education. (S9)

We also found creativity in forming new alliances among students, student unions, teachers, parents, ethnic groups, community organizations, and the international communities. Here, one participant discussed the importance of higher education to the revolution and connecting with alumni from her international educational experiences.

Higher education is really crucial in this revolution. [T]he students who got higher education from abroad are forming new alliances by themselves. For example, I have a large network of Harvard alumni, and we have the WhatsApp group. So, I can just reach out through my alumni groups, requesting what we need. I just need to text. The same thing happened to many others. (S1)

Mentioned here are new alliances formed among ethnic groups to support quality education.

We meet at least once a month online, especially with teachers from Mon, Karen, Shan, and Rakhine. Kachin people are doing a good job over there which is very motivating. In the past, we did not contact [Kachin educators/ethnic-based education] as we were teaching most of our time in lower Myanmar. But now we invite each other [to meet], and we support each other whenever we are in need. (S11)

This quote shows that while these ethnic-based schools had well-established education systems in place, the coup brought some of them together forming new alliances.

In a crisis, such as Covid or a coup, a commitment to diversity and inclusive and multilingual education in educational institutions can wane, with the loss of previous gains which can hurt the most vulnerable students. Although this was sometimes the case (see next section), we also found a doubling down on valuing equity and diversity in education even in the midst of the coup and Covid in Myanmar.

What: Creativity in Content of Higher Education

We also found creativity in crisis in our data in terms of what was taught including the curriculum and program development. Ten codes from our analysis of the 14 interviews in these areas included creativity in:

- adding awareness or more emphasis on social justice in the curriculum
- adding peace-building skills to the curriculum
- adding foreign languages (especially minority languages) to the curriculum
- adding conflict resolution to the curriculum
- forming ethnic-based higher education programs in their own languages
- forming new higher education programs for and across ethnic groups
- offering new majors and courses related to nation building and leadership
- teaching the histories of all peoples of Myanmar, not just Bama people
- rethinking higher education from the ground up (what it is, who it serves, how it's offered)
- offering online seminars, short courses, certificates, and programs in new content areas

In terms of content, the following participant noted the need to train up leaders and prepare ethnic people for the political arena as stated here 'All the different ethnic students can study together, can share, we can train new leaders for the future, especially political preparation' (S4). This was also mentioned by this participant: 'So education is one of the most important sectors, and it is very important to include in the curriculums which are intended for all ages so that it will be very effective in nation-building tasks' (S8).

This participant notes that ethnic language education is a right and should be taken on by those who speak those languages. She calls for decentralization and autonomy.

This is ethnic language education and it is a national right. [. . .] We have our own right to teach our generation our language. We are responsible for this teaching. So, we cannot expect the state to support us because the Myanmar government is dominated by the Burma majority. So, they will never understand the way we think, our identity. So, it's always good to support our education system run by us and run by our curriculum. (S5)

Policy is also in need of reform as noted by this participant: 'If we reform educational policy [and] appreciate the value of all kinds of ethnicities and reduce the concept that Burmese people are the most important in Myanmar, then

people [...] will respect and value each other and peace will be maintained (S13).

Valuing ethnic languages and histories and using home languages in education was often mentioned as a priority, and as discussed previously there was a desire to not wane in this commitment, but Covid and the coup chipped away at this as mentioned here.

If possible, we need to design our curriculums with our own languages. [...] For example, we taught our traditions, practices, and history. But that was just before Covid-19 hit, during the era of NLD. These days, we do not teach the ethnic languages. It has been three years since we could include those things in the school curriculum. (S14)

We include this to note that creativity alone is not always enough. Participants lamented the lack of equity of access to education for the working-class families in remote areas as stated here: 'The current problem is that the students from the rural areas and normal daily wage earners do not have the access to education' (S14).

How: Creativity in the Formation and Delivery of Higher Education

Thirteen codes emerged in our analysis under the broader theme of creativity related to how education was delivered. These included creativity in:

- alignment with a new government (NUG) to create new curriculum and policies
- creation and delivery of extended home-based or community-based learning in ethnic areas
- creation and delivery of new online courses, programs, and support
- new ways to deliver education, such as podcasts, radio, modems, and 'boxes'
- evacuation of scholars to safe locations to deliver online education from there
- providing free education or scholarships to those in rural areas
- organizing online webinars for teacher support in conflict zones
- international university collaborations to create and teach courses
- offering new certificates, short programs, degree finishing courses
- solving problems, such as rising internet costs and connectivity problems
- using a church umbrella to offer social justice education in urban areas

- using the crisis for a total overhaul of the higher educational system
- using education as a pillar to the revolution

Our participants were engaged in creating new and alternative educational systems in response to the need for students trying to avoid education from the state, as stated here:

A lot of students are reluctant to go to the universities and to the schools because you know they don't want this military system, but at the same time, they still need to get some sort of education within this period. So, our institution [and] other institutions are able to provide that for them. As more institutions started, we have discussions like what should we be doing? What's the best way forward? And even though it's only been a year, it's been developing well. (S3)

Another participant discussed the importance of mother tongue language use in education. This Burmese teacher was transformed by his year of teaching in Shan state. His creative suggestion is that all teachers from the Burmese majority should teach in rural areas for a period of time.

Sadly, most of the students in Shan State especially in the rural areas do not have access to quality education. If they had a chance, there would be an improvement. I mean in Yangon; they have much more opportunities than any other regions. If Shan students were given lectures in their own language, I am sure, I know my students very well, and they will also have that kind of quality education and opportunities like in Yangon. Before, I often thought that they have equal opportunities like us. It's something I often thought. But when I was there [in Shan State], my view and my mindset totally changed and I [began to] love them. I have a duty to change their minds, to educate them. That really amazed me and I don't know how or what had changed my mind but surely, it totally changed. [...] For these students, learning in the Burmese language is like being in hell! Ok, the truth is that they hate Burmese. [...] But they didn't hate me. I think almost every Burmese should have to go to teach in the ethnic zone in the ethnic areas and I think that would do a lot to change people's views. (S12)

A Karen teacher discussed a creative way to teach children, village by village.

One month after the coup most of the parents told me that we should do something for the students to continue their study. So, we decided to have home school teaching. We go to one village and make small groups like home teaching. We got the opportunity to teach students with their parents and the community. We

learned from the community, their daily lives, and their living style. [Some] parents don't teach their children because they are not able to read and write well. But we cannot go to every home. So, we collected students from the same grade in one house and another grade in another house and we rotated from one village to the next. (S6)

Another Karen teacher noted that establishing ethnic-based colleges is a start, but if their study, certificates, and degrees are not recognized either in their own country or internationally it presents a problem. We include this to acknowledge that creative educational solutions may need international cooperation and support.

The Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) that founded their own education systems before the military coup were not recognized in Burma. Even though we graduated from high school in the territory of the EAO, we were not allowed to study in Mandalay or in Rangoon. We would like to establish our colleges or universities in our own territory, like Karen, Kachin, Shan, and Arakan, but do you think our education system will be recognized? How do we need to improve in order to qualify and be accepted by the international universities? (S10)

Discussion

The February 2021 coup has negatively impacted all sectors in Myanmar and most notably education. In some cases, creativity and innovation was used to find solutions to problems, although we also found that without a safe and secure environment even the most creative solutions could prove ineffective. However, the crisis has opened a space for deep change and dialogue about education and its purpose as noted in this quote:

There is a need for education and [now] we are having more dialogue about what education should be and how we should approach it. What should happen to go forward, as open classes start to expand? We have a better idea of how to proceed and not just us, other institutions are providing education, and we learn from them as well. I believe after the coup, after the revolution is done and we have won, the education for Myanmar students will proceed in a different fashion than it did before because this coup has opened up a lot of space for dialogue. So, I do believe that it will change for the better. (S3)

Many actors in Myanmar have responded to this crisis in creative ways. While the NUG has shown creativity

in offering alternative educational online opportunities and even an alternative college entrance exam (Thang & Fishbein, 2023), the formation of the NUG has not been unproblematic and is by no means able to address this crisis on its own. Creativity in the form of alliances among EAOs and education programs offered by CSOs was also evident in our study and has great potential. Questions that could be explored in future research include the following: How can we support CDM teachers and professors, many of whom may not be involved in post-coup alternative higher education (SUM, 2023)? What is the relationship between ethnicity, language use, citizenship, and education and how can education be used to support greater understanding of the benefits of ethnic diversity and the peace dividend of supporting linguistic diversity in Myanmar (Wong, 2019)? What can new educational alternative systems in Myanmar learn from the more well-established ethnic-based school systems? Do the EAO and CSO-administered systems offer a potential road map for a future de-centralized education sector that would function under a new federal system in Myanmar? Can the development of a federal system in Myanmar that grants autonomy and legitimacy to ethnic-based educational programs be fostered and if so, how? What is needed to establish accreditation agencies that can empower non-state programs to offer national and/or international transferable certificates, diplomas, or degrees?

We want to acknowledge the vulnerability, pain, and suffering that our participants have undergone and express our gratitude to them for sharing their reflections and lessons. Finally, we want to reiterate the sentiments expressed in quotes of this chapter, namely the value of being able to teach one's own histories and teach in one's own languages, the importance of equity of access to quality education, and the potential of education to empower people to resist oppression.

Acknowledgements Note that some of the quotes were edited slightly for length and clarity. We want to thank our participants for sharing their time and their stories. We hope this article allows readers to see the resilience and creativity of people of Myanmar who in their struggle for social justice and peace and have taught us much about what education should and can be.

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Data availability We promised participants we would not do this.

Declarations

Competing interest There are no Competing interests in the writing of this article.

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