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Locally-grounded, embodied, and spiritual: exploring alternative constructions of democratic education with/in Indonesian schools

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary scholars have called for more diverse conceptions and practices of alternative ‘democratic’ education to contest the increasingly neoliberal and neoconservative educational systems. The current study responds to this call by exploring how the notion of ‘democratic’ education can be enriched using the contextual practices of education in Indonesia. Co-constructing qualitative data through site visits, document analysis, and interviews with leaders of five uniquely ‘democratic’ Indonesian schools, the current study seeks to expand the ‘thin’ understandings of democratic education characterised by ostensibly universal democratic virtues such as freedom, equality, social justice, and participation. Exploring what democratic education looks like when understood through the collective sensibilities of Indonesians, analysis revealed at least three alternative constructions of democratic education practiced by participating schools, namely, locally-grounded, embodied, and spiritual democratic education. By identifying and circulating these alternative constructions, it is hoped that the notions of democratic education might be continuously reimagined and diversified.

KEYWORDS

Democratic education; Indonesia; democracy; local wisdom; spirituality

Introduction

Contemporary critical scholars have called for the identifications, circulations, and advancements of democratic alternatives to contest the increasingly dominant neoliberal and neoconservative educational systems all over the world (Apple 2011; Fielding and Moss 2011; Giroux 2002). Marketisation, privatisation, bureaucratisation, and centralisation of control have characterised 21st century educational reforms from early childhood to higher education levels (see for example, Adriany 2018; Fleming 2021; Sakhiyya and Rata 2019). One of the concerns repeatedly identified by such scholars is that, when market mechanisms and corporatism are penetrating educational policies and institutions

at an unprecedented scale and speed, democratic values, practices, and ways of being are increasingly receding from educational arenas. Democracy and democratic education have therefore become key discourses in the movements against the neoliberalisation of education.

But 'democracy' is an evolving and contested notion (Foner 1998; Helgesen and Li 1996) as is 'democratic education'. More than a political system of governance, democracy is also a socio-politico-cultural system in which the meanings of democracy are constructed and shaped by the understandings and interpretations about the world (Kubow 2018), including in education. The currently dominant views of 'democratic education' have revolved around educating students in the values associated with democracy, such as freedom, equality, participation, and social justice (Gutmann and Ben-Porath 2015; Rata 2020; Yates 1999). Standardised assessment tools have even been developed to measure how 'democratic' an educational practice is, based on the enactment of those values in the classroom (e.g., Pažur 2022; Shechtman 2002). Exemplary evidence can be seen, for instance, in an encyclopaedia entry entitled 'democratic education' by Gutmann and Ben-Porath (2015) which provides an overview of the key concepts and current debates on the topic. Focusing on the process of equipping students with the knowledge and skills essential to enjoy basic liberties and participate in democratic governance, Gutmann and Ben-Porath did not consider different views on democracy and democratic education from local contextualities all over the world. To use Biesta's (2009, 109) words, such ignorance is 'basically a colonial way to understand democratisation and it is precisely the logic behind what I see as the imperialistic expansion of (a certain definition of) democracy which is currently happening at the geo-political level'. We called this a 'thin' understanding of democratic education, which implies a nuance of the universality of virtues, contexts, and its envisioned subjects of democratic education. Consequently, it has been dismissive, not only of the diverse understandings, interpretations, and practices of democratic values and their socio-cultural contexts, but also undemocratic in nature as it inadvertently restricts alternative meanings of democratic education.

A call for more collective, 'thicker', culturally-relevant forms of democratic education have been made, including by Apple (2011, 21 and 23) who identified that 'critical and democratic education in general in many nations have not been sufficiently connected to the actual realities of schools . . . curricula that have little relationship with the cultures and lives of the students in our schools'. It is, thus, important to bring down the 'thin', universalist notion of democratic education by locating and understanding it within localised everyday practices, scaling it down, pluralising, and particularising it. In fact, a small but growing scholarship in this field has begun to reimagine democratic citizens and democratic education through various local discourses (e.g., Davids and Waghid 2019; Kubow 2007, 2018; Quaynor 2018; Schweisfurth 2002). For instance, as an alternative understanding of democratic learning, Kubow (2007, 2018) has explored an African moral ethic called *Ubuntu* or humanness which views individuals as embedded in the community in the context of Southern African countries. *Ubuntu* has provided a new conceptual landscape of democratic education on the basis of compassion, communalism, and collectivism. From Western Africa, the symbolic meanings of *Adinkra* (balance between power, individualism, and communalism) have been discussed vis-à-vis democratic education (Quaynor 2018). Another example can be found in Davids and Waghid's (2019) discussion of Islamic philosophies and the values of compassion, love, mercy, care,

forgiveness, patience, gratitude, belligerence, and empathy as forms of enactments and manifestations of democratic education. By collecting tales of radical schools around the world such as in Reggio Emilia in Italy and St George-in-the-East in London, Fielding and Moss (2011) are hopeful in envisioning the grounded, viable, and desirable alternative democratic education compared to the neoconservative and neoliberal schooling.

Joining this scholarship on global democratic alternatives to mainstream education, we seek to enrich and augment the current literature that have demonstrated the diverse interpretations and practices of democratic education with locally-derived constructions from Indonesia. Indonesia's indigenous and religious forms of learning and its historical trajectories of colonialism and authoritarianism have lent nuance to its contemporary democratisation and democratic education (Sakhiyya 2011). The question guiding the current research is: What alternative understandings may we generate from Indonesian contexts to give new meanings to democratic education which is locally-grounded? In so doing we do not simply identify and describe such democratic alternative practices, but further reimagine how democratic education can be given meaning beyond its 'thin' understanding. It is important to note that we are not against enactments of the democratic values of individual freedom, equality, social justice, and participation in educational settings; nor do we attempt to 'fit' the notion of 'democratic education' into our local contexts. Instead, this study explores the ways in which such 'democratic' values and conceptions can be challenged and expanded with some alternative constructions about what counts as democratic education through the everyday educational practices of Indonesian educators.

This paper begins with the historical trajectories and landscape of Indonesian education before exploring colonialism to contemporary systems. This section traces the shift from locally and spiritually rooted, community-based learning to a secular modern schooling. The next section presents the methodology we used to accomplish our study. We then demonstrate our findings of the three alternative constructions of democratic education as practiced in the participating schools, namely, locally-grounded, embodied, and spiritual democratic education. The attempts at identifying and circulating these alternative constructions is important to crack open the possibility of various meanings of democracy and democratic education which is central to global democratic processes.

The genesis and landscape of Indonesian 'democratic' education

The genesis and earlier landscape of Indonesian education have not been precisely known or methodically documented. Early forms of education existed long before colonialism and even before the name Indonesia was coined (Indonesia was then called *Nusantara*). The nature of early forms of learning or education in *Nusantara* were locally rooted, spiritually charged, religiously based, and community oriented. During the 11th-12th centuries when Hinduism and Buddhism were prominent beliefs in some main islands in *Nusantara*, including several Javanese *kebatinan* (mysticism), sites of learning were integrated in praying temples (Kasidi 2010). Several distinctive sites of learning called *padepokan* can be found in archaeological sites near the temples.

As Islam entered the archipelago, *pesantren* started to expand in the 16th century. Similar to *padepokan* as the centre of learning, *pesantren* was often referred to as *pondok pesantren* or only *pondok* which means a hut made of bamboo or other light

materials. This lightness and simplicity 'reflected a heritage of humble origins and scholars wandering in search of knowledge' (Pringle 2010). Both *padepokan* and *pesantren* were rooted in the local community, religion, culture, and philosophy. Education in this respect had its roots in traditional religious teachings (either Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam) of sacred wisdom and knowledge in which learning was a sacred process of spiritual cultivation including through symbolisms and aesthetics. In the Javanese contexts, for instance, the Javanese attached symbolic meanings to almost everything, including educational processes. One example is *Lir Ilir* which was a folk song created by a prominent Muslim preacher, Sunan Kalijaga, in the 16th century to teach and remind his disciples of the existence of God and the interconnectedness between humans and other cosmic entities. The traditional song served as a continuous reminder that humans must take care of the universe – its forests, rivers, sky, and sea – and to keep them in harmony. Five centuries later, by learning from *pesantren* and *madrassa* as one of the Islamic educational institutions, Barton (2010) highlights that Islamic education and secular democracy is not antithetical. Islamic civil society has contributed to Indonesia's democratisation.

When the Dutch occupied the archipelago in 1831, a modern secular education system was introduced as a consequence of the Ethical Policy in the 1900s. This Western education offered a more structured system that fostered rational and autonomous individuals through text-based readings, verbal deliberation, and debates. Dutch was employed as the medium of instruction (Bahasa Indonesia or the Indonesian national language was not formed yet), and thus foreign language mastery was central in the learning process. However modern and democratic it might sound, only the children of Indonesian *priyayi* (the royal family and upper/middle class) could enjoy this modern schooling. The rest of the population went to *pesantren* or *padepokan*, or did not go to school at all. The elitist nature of this modern schooling was bereft of democratic values given the stark discrimination and inequality amongst social classes.

The unequal access to education and deepening poverty as a result of *longue durée* colonialism led notable nationalist intelligentsia to envision what counts as democratic education and establishing schooling systems accessible to the wider Indonesian public. There were several of these, but the two most notable were Ki Hajar Dewantara through Taman Siswa schools, and Raden Ajeng Kartini through Kartini schools for girls. Kartini schools responded to social inequality by focusing on lower-class girls and women who were deemed the most vulnerable in society. As one of the first Indonesian girls ever to enter a primary school for Europeans in 1885, Kartini founded two schools for girls in her very short life (Kartini died at the age of 25). In advocating the rights to education, Kartini was in intensive correspondence with the Dutch colonial government prior to the Ethical Policy, sending a provocative memorandum to the colonial government entitled 'Educate the Javanese!' (Kartini and Taylor 1974). In one letter, Kartini wrote:

A good number (of education initiatives) must be made to cultivate people in heart and spirit, well versed in their own tongue and culture, and then in Netherlands' and European science. The strong must assimilate the New for their fellow countryfolk so the countryfolk can adapt themselves to it through them (90).

In a similar vein to Kartini, Ki Hajar Dewantara was critical of the Dutch schooling system and its educational methods. In his criticism, Dewantara believed that although it enjoyed

popularity in the early days of its existence here, the Western school now causes resentment among those who expected something other than intellectualism, materialism, and individualism from Europe. It is now more obvious than ever that these three products of the Western school constitute the most visible causes of our spiritual as well as our social unrest (Dewantara 1967, 153). In formulating Taman Siswa's approach, he combined some progressive international secular methods with indigenous values and culture. Taman Siswa drew on the ideas of Montessori and Froebel from Europe, and the Dalton school system in the United States on the importance of self-expression and adjusting teaching to the terms of the child's world, while highlighting indirect guidance and control (McVey 1967). Taman Siswa's curriculum provided a deep engagement in Javanese music, dance, and visual arts so that students had a sense of their own culture and embodied those values. Dewantara formulated the principles of democratic education in three Javanese maxims:

Ing ngarso sung tulodho – [Those] in front should set an example

Ing madyo mangun karso – [Those] in the middle should raise the spirit

Tut wuri handayani – [Those] behind should give encouragement

The three maxims set out what counts as an Indonesian democratic approach to education, and are still used as the motto of Indonesia's Ministry of Education and Culture.

These progressive educational ideals were, however, gradually corroded when the New Order authoritarian administration took control from 1966–1998. During over three decades of centralised authoritarian rule, the New Order regime positioned education as an ideological apparatus to support their Developmental and Anti-Communist agenda at the expense of democratic principles (Guggenheim 2012; Rakhmani 2021; Rosser 2016). Leigh (1999) observed that schooling in Indonesia during this period did not always mean learning, let alone democratic learning, but was rather, indoctrination in the state agendas. The rapidly increasing literacy rate – from 56.6% in 1971, to 69.3% in 1980, and to 83.7% in 1990 (UNESCO 1974, 1977, 1999) – was claimed as a result of the regime's achievement in massifying education. This achievement, nevertheless, was mainly a reflection of the rising enrolment rate in elementary schools (Sakhiyya and Hapsari 2021); not to mention the fact that enrolment rate was not synonymous with completion rates.

The collapse of the New Order administration in 1998 marked the birth of democracy in a post-authoritarian context. However, the use of bureaucratic incentives to undermine democracy and the after effect of the long suppression of democratic principles in education, continues to impinge on the Indonesian education system today (Sakhiyya and Hapsari 2021). Nevertheless, several alternative schools and progressive thinkers in education have attempted to push past this authoritarian legacy by redefining and reconstituting what counts as democratic schooling processes. We observed these schools and interviewed their principals to explore how the notion of 'democratic' education can be complicated from the contextual practices of education in Indonesia.

Methodology

In order to explore alternative, contextual practices of democratic education in Indonesia, the researchers visited and co-constructed qualitative data with five school leaders in the

Indonesian islands of Bali and Java. The schools recruited were the Gurukula and Trihita Schools in Bali, Taman Siswa and Mangunan Experimental Schools in Yogyakarta, and Qaryah Thayyibah School in Central Java.

The process of choosing these schools was not without difficulties as we grappled with the paradox of finding 'democratic' schools while questioning and expanding what 'democratic' could mean. We decided to choose these schools because of their – at least – two striking similarities, namely, child-centredness and their accommodation of local wisdoms. Based in Bali, the Gurukula and Trihita Schools derive their educational approaches from the Hindu philosophies practiced by local people in the region. Similarly, Mangunan Experimental and Qaryah Thayyibah schools nurture democratic values by merging religious undertones in their education (Catholicism and Islam, respectively) with local wisdom. Meanwhile, the Taman Siswa School consistently adapted and applied the values of 'democratic' education proposed by Ki Hajar Dewantara, a leading figure in the development of the modern Indonesian education system.

Following an ethics-approval procedure, data were collected in November-December 2021 through site visits, individual interviews, and document analyses. These methods were chosen because they complement each other and can provide a more complex and holistic understanding of schools conceptually, spatially, and socially. During the site visits, we explored, observed, and took notes about the school settings particularly their physical design and spatial arrangement. Document analyses were performed on books written by the school founders, namely, by Dewantara (2013, Taman Siswa School), Mangunwijaya (2020, Mangunan Experimental School), and Bahruddin (2020, Qaryah Thayyibah School). As we sought participants who could speak about the philosophical foundations of the school, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with school principals or directors, some of them brought a teacher to accompany them during the interview. In total, seven people were interviewed: (5 school leaders, 2 teachers; 4 females, 3 males; 3 Muslims, 2 Hindus, 2 Catholics), all were in their middle adulthood and had been with the school for more than 5 years. The questions asked were around their school's practices in relation to the local philosophy, culture, and community. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and then – together with field notes and relevant documents – analysed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun and Clarke 2006) where codes and themes pertinent to the research question were generated, reviewed, named, and articulated. As far as possible, codes were generated from the bottom-up; no code-book was used. The underlying themes within the data were explored inductively and driven by the research question specified above.

Findings

Our analysis revealed at least three alternative constructions of democratic education in the ways participating schools conceptualised and practiced their education, namely: democratic education as locally-grounded, democratic education as embodied aesthetic experience, and democratic education as spiritual. It is important to note that these findings are not exhaustive nor representative of education in Indonesia. Instead, our discussions below seek to offer some possible alternative ways of understanding and doing democratic education which might enrich global theorisations of democratic education.

Democratic education as locally-grounded

The first alternative construction of democratic education that emerged in our data analysis was the notion of democratic education as grounded in the local community, culture, history, and philosophy. To complement the ostensibly universal and timeless ideas of freedom, equality and social justice commonly associated with democracy and democratic education, our analysis of Indonesian schools showed that education cannot be democratic if it disconnects students from their localities and historicity. In this section, in order to make a case for the inclusion of locality as one of the key features of democratic education, we demonstrate what democratic education might look like when it is understood through a sense of collectiveness, groundedness, and local wisdom rooted in Indonesian contexts.

The schools participating in the current study demonstrated various instances of local-groundedness in their everyday educational practices. *Mangunan Experimental School* actively involved teachers in local (Javanese, agricultural) communities around the school so that classroom learning, discussions, and student projects were organically oriented towards cultural and community praxis. Some examples include introducing students to farmers' tools, making traditional food and snacks, encouraging student projects to be locally-engaged, and inviting local elders to speak about traditional festivals, rituals, and social practices. Similarly, *Qaryah Thayyibah School* asked new students to walk around kampongs where the school was located and interview local people during the orientation week. The *Taman Siswa School* considered traditional art, culture, and philosophy (e.g., song, dance, sayings, poetry, traditional social games, painting, wood carving art, and *Batik* art) as the central features of their education. The *Gurukula School* maintained the Balinese practice of *ngayah* or giving helping hands to local communities during the religious and cultural events that took place regularly throughout the year. In these events, students performed *gamelan* (traditional music) and dance (including sacred dances), built a traditional-styled temporary canopy, made traditional ornaments and religious offerings, cooked traditional foods, and wore traditional clothing. In the contexts of an increasingly technocratic, neoliberal, and modernised Indonesia (Sakhiyya and Rata 2019), these locally-oriented learning experiences were democratically disruptive as they reconnected students back to Indonesia's agricultural, communal, cultural, and religious roots.

We argue that this locally-grounded education is democratic in at least two ways. Firstly, to have some knowledge, first-hand engagement, and a sense of pride in one's own local culture is an act of political resistance against the influx of the homogenising, capitalist, global products, ideas, and values currently taking place in Indonesia and elsewhere (see, for example, Wassmann 2020). To discursively contest dominant narratives and disperse monopolised socio-cultural influence is, fundamentally, democratic power sharing. Secondly, if democratic education cultivates students' sense of social justice for the marginalised (as opposed to silent acceptance of oppressions in authoritarian contexts), inequalities between cultures in the post-colonial worlds need to be addressed. An education that is locally-grounded is an ideological attempt to rework such inequalities, namely, by putting the marginalised local discourses and practices at the centre stage of education.

As also identified in previous studies in the Global South (Kubow 2018; Quaynor 2018; Schweisfurth 2002), one recurring feature of Indonesian locality found in the current study is the notion of collective sensibility. Personhood in various parts of the Global South has been defined through affective ties and a sense of interconnectedness between oneself and others. How do these differing constructions of the self manifest in education, or more specifically, in democratic education? Dewantara (2013, 56–58) eloquently illustrated this in his writing in 1938 during Indonesia's colonial era:

In ancient Java, even ancient Indonesia and Asia more generally, a school was the master's house ... People referred to the school by the master's name. ... The atmosphere of the school is the master's personal passion. ... Let us compare it with Western school system. We see a building without personality. In the morning it is filled with children studying and playing around, teachers walking or sitting, but in the afternoon the school is closed, nobody lives there. Whoever had come to Taman Siswa can immediately feel the similarity between a Western school with an office, a shop, a factory, a train station, a restaurant, and other inhabited buildings. It is in stark contrast with Taman Siswa schoolhouse where students in the morning, noon, and afternoon are busy studying, exercising, or rehearsing arts under the supervision of the teachers. How dwarf the list of school subjects in the morning is as compared to the close interactions between students and teachers till dusk. ... where students experience a family-like environment. ... no need for prohibitions nor mechanistic command of the written rules ... because education is not just intellectuality, but also, and most importantly, education as nurture and moral training. ... Such a schoolhouse is not the same with boarding school which is not family-like, but rather, student-director relationship, a commander who is so feared ... like in a military barracks. (authors' translation)

As Dewantara suggests, a more democratically-relevant and locally-grounded education in a collective society like Indonesia might be one that is personal, holistic, family-like, and woven into students' social fabric, which he called an *among* (= nurture) method. Dewantara mentioned *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) and *pasraman* (Hindu boarding school) to illustrate his idea of Taman Siswa schoolhouse. Among the schools participating in the current study, Dewantara's idea of family-like educational relationships can be seen in how these schools emphasised less formal, more nurturing and friendly relationship between teachers and students. During their interviews, Mangunan Experimental School leaders said that 'this school becomes students' second home, where teachers become their parents, uncles/aunts, brothers/sisters; their class is a family'. In Qaryah Thayyibah School (located in the school leader/founder's house), teachers were referred as *pendamping* or (learning) companions to avoid the hierarchical meanings and formality traditionally attached to the term teacher (Bahruddin 2020). Most visibly, during his interview, the leader of Gurukula School, which is a *pasraman* with more than four hundred students, greeted passing students by their individual names. He also told the researcher some of the students' background stories. He claimed that such education, where teachers knew all students personally and interacted with them beyond school hours, is 'the real education'.

While we do not simply advocate *pesantren*, *pasraman*, or family-like schoolhouses as a better form of education, we argue that an emphasis on organic, nurturing, and holistic educational relationships can be considered as an alternative version of democratic education, particularly in the contexts of contemporary Indonesia. As Indonesian educators ourselves, we are intensely aware of how mainstream Indonesian education system, as in many other countries, has been increasingly characterised by bureaucratisation and

the neoliberalisation of education (Gaus and Hall 2015; Rosser 2016). As a result, there is hardly any sense of freedom. Audit culture's micro-management and market-oriented curriculum has forced educators to spend their time and energy on performance indicators and filling in endless audit forms taking their attention away from nurture, dialogue, self-cultivation, and liberating practices (Wijaya Mulya et al. 2021), or in the words of Gurukula School's leader, from 'the real education'. Both the starting and end point of Indonesia's notorious bureaucracy – including educational bureaucracy – is a deep sense of distrust that cuts both ways: students and teachers doubt the good intentions, if any, of the bureaucratic authorities; and educational authorities' distrust in teachers and students resulting in scrupulous audit procedures and examination culture. Democracy requires trust, yet, trust is difficult after centuries of colonialism and decades of authoritarianism and corruption. A small educational microcosm (as in a *pesantren* or *pasraman*) where social practices are defined through trust not audit, knowledge of everyone's stories not professionalism, and freedom to determine learning not bureaucratic impositions, might cure or at least gradually erode future generation's deep-seated sense of political distrust.

Democratic education as embodied and aesthetic experience

... in Western education, (the) intellect emerged as the 'absolute ruler',
as the 'dictator' in the kingdom of our soul.

Ki Hadjar Dewantara (2013, 53, originally written in 1938)

In this second alternative construction of democratic education, we identify and discuss the embodied dimensions of democratic learning. Predicated upon the premise that a person is already a democratic community, we propose that education may not be democratic enough if it overly emphasises the rational and textual dimensions of learning and ignores the education of the body as a democratic entity. As demonstrated by the schools participating in the current study, attending to the body and embodied experience in education may foster more nuanced views of democratic participation and inclusiveness.

As the epigraph of this section shows, Dewantara (2013) has been critical of Western education's emphasis on the rational, cognitive, and linguistic dimensions of the human subject; the form of 'Western' education he had observed during the colonial era in Indonesia. His choice of the word 'dictator' suggests a stark contrast with a democratic government and democratic education. The metaphor of 'the kingdom of our soul' implies that a person is itself already a political community with various elements of personhood interacting internally, either democratically or despotically. Growing up in Yogyakarta's royal family, Dewantara was deeply influenced by the philosophical, artistic, and cultural environments of the royal palace. A candidate for the king, for instance, must not only master but must also create a new Javanese royal dance before he can be crowned (Dewantara 2013, 316). Dewantara promptly identified that the education of the body and soul was missing from 'Western' colonial education during his time. In terms of rational and linguistic expressions, during the interviews in the current study, Gurukula and Trihita school leaders could not straightforwardly articulate how local Balinese Hindu philosophies shaped their educational approaches, despite the perceptible symbolic presence of such philosophies in the design of their physical space, school activities,

and bodily expressions. Similarly, Mangunwijaya (2020) emphasised the importance of '*rasa* (sensibility), feeling, and heart as teachers' in teacher education programmes – things which are not easily scientifically specified, quantified, and evaluated. To be truly democratic, education might need to attend to the intricacies of embodied, experiential, spatial, and non-verbal dimensions of democratic learning, and their implications vis-à-vis freedom, justice, and agency.

In the contexts of our research, education as embodied experience par excellence can be found in Dewantara's (2013, 81) crystallisation of the dimensions of education into three Javanese words: *wiraga* (body), *wirama* (rhythm), and *wirasa* (the inner alignment of aesthetics, epistemology, and morality with cosmic forces, Zemmrich 2020). As Dewantara suggested, the *wiraga* (body) aspect of education should be the first to be introduced to young children. It focuses on sensorial and physical experiences through songs, dance, crafts, stories, exercise, sports, traditional social games, *pencak silat*/martial arts, and nature or spatial explorations (Dewantara 2013). In contrast with Cartesian mind/body dualism (see Paechter 2004), Dewantara believed that 'mind and body are inseparable ... (so that) educating the body is educating the soul' (Dewantara 2013, 467). During the interview, Taman Siswa's principal demonstrated a song from their traditional children's song collections (*tembang dolanan*); her voice and hand movements were visibly precise, measured, and balanced – evidencing years of bodily and artistic refinement. In Qaryah Thayyibah school, every Friday is allocated for 'health day, which is basically having fun day' where students 'happily play sports or traditional games, do aerobics together, swim in the river, and so on' (Bahruddin 2020, 70). In these instances, the body, senses, emotions, and space were as important as the intellect in education.

The *wirama* (rhythm) aspect of education develops students' mental and bodily harmony in everything they do, just like nature works in rhythmic cycles: day and night, month and year, seasons, tides, etc. Music, song, and dance are certainly rhythmic and useful for *wirama* education but more importantly, *wirama* is about developing inner regularity, daily routine, self-discipline, behavioural orderliness, and well-mannered speech. In Qaryah Thayyibah school, for example, there is no sound of bells to indicate the starting time, end time, or break time at the school. They prefer the students to internally develop an 'organic rhythm of the learning at the school' (Bahruddin 2020, 10), rather than external impositions of behavioural management.

The *wirasa* aspect of education engages with the aesthetic, moral, psychological and spiritual dimensions of the human subject. The Indonesian word *rasa* can be translated as feelings, mood, taste, or inner knowledge. Derived from Sanskrit, *rasa* in classical Indian contexts was an aesthetic concept representing 'the match between artistic expressions and their reception' (Zemmrich 2020, 166). Corresponding with *rasa*'s etymological root, Dewantara advocated that 'art/aesthetics is the pinnacle of education' which cultivates the *wirasa* of the students. During the interview, Taman Siswa's principal further elaborated: 'What we mean by *wirasa* in education is that the end result of education is a refined character, appreciation of beauty and aesthetics, and inner freedom'. To achieve such ideals – which students should aspire to be – education necessitates embodied, artistic, and experiential learning experiences.

While the embodied dimensions of learning might not be commonly and explicitly included in contemporary dominant (or 'thin') discourses of democratic education (see, for example, Gutmann and Ben-Porath 2015), the educational philosopher John Dewey

not only identified how embodied learning was often missing from mainstream education at his time (early 1900s), but also linked embodied learning with democratic education and freedom (Dewey 1903, 200–201):

... an active and vital participation through the medium of *all the bodily organs* with the means and materials of building up *first-hand experience*. Contrast this first and most fundamental of all the demands for an effective *use of mind* with what we find in so many of our elementary and high schools. There first-hand experience is at a discount; in its stead are summaries and formulas of the results of other people ... Until the emphasis changes to the conditions which make it necessary for the child to take an active share in the personal building up of his [sic] own problems and to participate in methods of solving them (even at the expense of experimentation and error), mind is not really freed (our emphasis).

In a similar vein we argue that, in paying attention to the education of the body and aesthetics lies the possibility for democratic advancements vis-à-vis freedom, agency, justice, inclusion, and participation. A self-cultivating and art-oriented education is generally less restrictive, particularly when compared to Indonesia's current national curriculum characterised by standardisation, performance indicators, and market orientation (Wijaya Mulya 2019). Opportunities for bodily movements, spatial explorations, and artistic creativity foster a better sense of freedom and agency for students, not pressures to follow orders. The acknowledgement of students' diverse potentials beyond scholastic cognitive abilities, such as in arts, offers a more just and inclusive approach because, as Qaryah Thayibbah's school leader put it, 'appreciative atmosphere can be enjoyed by all students in our school exhibitions, not just the (academically) privileged few' (Bahruddin 2020, 79). Further, embodied spatial experiences of education, such as nature play in Qaryah Thayyibah School and Trihita School, and community engagement in Mangunan Experimental School, created sensorial and visceral memories about nature and local community for the students. Consequently, as our interview data showed, students in these schools often chose environmental issues and socio-cultural inequalities as themes for their independent projects – hinting at a possibility for future engagement in participatory citizenry.

Democratic education as spiritual

We as individuals and as humanity suffer from a lack of connection to other people, religious and political strife, alienation from nature and its rhythms, militarism, and corporate hegemony, resulting in environmental destruction; the decimation of many species of wildlife, forests, and wildflowers; the poisoning of our rivers, seas, and air; and climate change, to the point where our very survival as a species is in question. Adopting the big idea of Spiritual Democracy, the realisation of the oneness of humanity with the universe and all its forces, can help people feel joy, peace, and interconnectedness on an individual basis. It can also inspire us to undertake sacred activism, the channelling of such forces into callings that are compassionating, just, and of equitable heart and conscience, and give us some tools to start solving some of these grave global problems, while uniting people on the planet (Herrmann 2014, xiii).

The third and final alternative construction of democratic education in our data analysis is constituted through an awareness of the interconnection between democracy and spirituality, or what has been termed: spiritual democracy (Herrmann 2014; Garrison and

O'Quinn 2004; Woods and Woods 2008). As described in Herrmann's (2014) quote above, spiritual democracy extends the notions of justice, liberty, peace, equality, and ethical relationships from human-to-human relations to the relationship between humans and other elements of the universe. In contrast to the traditional views of democracy which are anthropocentric, the data in the current study revealed how democratic education may cultivate a sense of interconnectedness between human beings and other cosmological entities, including animals, plants, objects, the Earth, and the Divine. In the wake of the current global environmental crisis, we argue that democratic education is not democratic enough unless it teaches peaceful coexistence, harmony, and democratic relationships between humans and the entire cosmos.

In the Indonesian context, spiritual traditions and religions have historically been a part of its socio-political consciousness and epistemologies; and even more perceptible in its democratisation era (1998 until now) where tensions between religious conservatism and more inclusive religio-spiritual discourses were salient. Some of the post-1998 governments, democracy activists, and moderate religious leaders have engaged in efforts to contest and curb the growing conservatism, anti-democratic Islamist groups, the persecution of religious minorities, and terrorist bombings (Fealy 2019; Mietzner 2018). Correspondingly, in the field of education, international and Indonesian studies on democratic education have discussed similar tensions between religious truth claims and democratic multicultural citizenship (e.g., Ahmad 2004; Wijaya Mulya, Aditomo, and Suryani 2021) or exploring religious discourses which are supportive of democracy (e.g., Saada and Gross 2017). However, little is known about how (religio-)spiritual democracy may manifest in education, particularly how it might expand and challenge the dominant meanings of democracy to include wider cosmological entities.

Data in the current study exhibited various ways in which spiritual democracy may characterise educational practices. As explained in the Introduction section, education in Indonesia has its roots in traditional Islamic practices of teaching sacred wisdom and knowledge (Sakhiyya and Rata 2019). In these continuing traditions, education is a sacred process of spiritual cultivation, teaching is a sacred profession, the school is sacred ground, educational leadership is a sacred matter (Wijaya Mulya and Sakhiyya 2021), and – we would suggest – democratic education is sacred activism. A relevant key local concept found in the current study is 'Tri Hita Karana' (which is also the inspiration behind the name of Trihita School we interviewed), a Balinese-Hindu conceptualisation of three sources of happiness, namely, harmonious relationship with other human beings, with nature, and with the Divine. This concept resonates with Islamic teachings of *Hablum Minallah* (good relationship with God), *Hablum Minannas* (with other humans), and *Hablum Minalalam* (with nature). Educationally, such notions of harmonious relationships might manifest in the inclusion of animals, plants, green spaces, and rituals of respect for invisible spiritual beings in the schooling settings. When interviewing school leaders in Mangunan Experimental and Gurukula Schools, for example, we were surprised when the hens wandered into our seating area. Intrusive visits such as these were then described by interviewees at Mangunan Experimental School as 'a part of learning to live together and respect God's creation'. In Gurukula School, it initiated a long conversation about how the school has a small farm, cattle, and pets on their premises; how students were rotated every week to take care certain parts of the school including garden, farm, cattle yard, and others; and how the motto of the school was *Vasudhava Kutumbukan*/the World is

a Family – where, the school leader explained, the World also refers to animals and nature. Typical in Balinese contexts, both Gurukula and Trihita Schools practiced Hindu cultural traditions at schools, such as covering certain trees with black and white cloth to sacralise and respect spiritual beings believed to dwell in the trees. As Gurukula school's leader succinctly articulated: 'This school is a sacred ground. Manners must be maintained. The place must be properly taken care of'. Such a sense of respect, care, and interconnectedness with the nature were also featured in Taman Siswa where the principal said: 'Bring children close to the nature, use natural and recycled materials for learning, like stones, leaves, writing on the sand, and so on'. Studying in green, outdoor spaces was also a common practice in Qaryah Thayibbah School, Trihita School, and Mangunan Experimental School – an embodied educational experience that brought students closer to nature and natural spaces.

Further, spiritually-oriented learning was not only about first-hand engagement with animals, plants, and natural spaces, but also about cultivating an awareness that one is a small part within the larger cosmological powers and systems. Dewantara's (2013), for example, often emphasised *khodrat alam* or nature's principle in learning including the organic rhythm of learning, age-relevant schooling practices, and nurture- or cultivation-oriented education; not an externally imposed, rigidly scheduled, and market-oriented curriculum. Here, the understanding of and aligning oneself with cosmic rhythms and principles become an important spiritual dimension of education. Correspondingly, Trihita school's leader expressed similar sentiments about the nature, learning, and school management:

Nature has good energy; children are easily understood or enlightened when learning in natural spaces, not forced. . . . We prefer natural ways of doing things here in the school, like, we don't do aggressive marketing, let it flow naturally. Let me ask you, how do you know about our school? It must be the nature, the bigger power that connects us.

Twenty-first century democracy and democratic education should not only be about equality and power sharing between human beings, or human freedom from all kinds of oppression; but also a rethinking of democratic values within wider planetary contexts, and the educational implications of such rethinking. Drawing upon the theorisations of the interconnectedness between humans and other cosmic entities, it is evident that our forests, oceans, animals, and even other beings unrecognised by scientific methodologies might have been exploited, marginalised, and oppressed through the dominant discourse of anthropocentrism. In the light of such understandings, democratic practices can be expanded in several ways: from a commitment to social justice to cosmological justice, human rights to animal rights, political activism to sacred activism, and democratic education to spiritually-oriented democratic education. As demonstrated throughout this section, there is a plethora of resources, both conceptual and practical, available to be explored in order to develop spiritual democratic education from the contextuality of contemporary Indonesian education.

Conclusion

In the current study we have explored the possibility of alternative conceptualisations and practices of democratic education by researching 'democratic' education in a specific Global South context, Indonesia. Three alternative constructions of 'democratic' education were

identified, namely, locally-grounded, embodied, and spiritual democratic education. The first construction, locally-grounded democratic education, proposes that education is considered democratic when it connects students to their cultural and historical contextualities. Democratic educational practices need to develop students' sense of connectedness with local culture and critical awareness of marginalised local discourses and practices. Secondly, embodied democratic education refers to an education that attends to the intricacies of embodied, aesthetic, experiential, spatial, and non-verbal dimensions of democratic learning. Finally, democratic education might need to expand its anthropocentric orientation to include broader planetary entities, or what has been named spiritual democracy. We hope that these three alternative constructions identified in the current study may contribute to and advance 'thick' understandings of democratic education to complement the commonly discussed ideas such as individual liberty, equality, social justice, and participatory decision making.

There are some limitations to the current study. Firstly, the discursive analysis presented here drew heavily on ethnographic observations and available documents, while interview data tended to complement them. As a result, the voices of the participants were not strongly represented. Secondly, the interview participants in the current study were limited to school leaders (and some teachers they incidentally brought to the interview session). A more deliberate attempt to listen to and explore teachers' and students' voices would provide more complex understandings of the everyday dynamics of such 'democratic' education. We encourage future studies to explore these dynamics.

There are some possible implications of the current study. Firstly, as our findings demonstrated, characterising (or evaluating) certain educational practice as 'democratic' should not be done in mechanistic, 'objective', or universalist ways. Standardised, validated quantitative instruments derived from Western theorisations of democratic education (e.g., Pažur 2022; Shechtman 2002) might, for example, be contextually irrelevant and historically imprecise. Attending to local complexities of what might possibly count as 'democratic' education should be the key analytical posture. Secondly, educators might find benefit in considering various local resources (practices, philosophies, history, arts, ways of seeing and being) in understanding, teaching, embodying, and problematising 'democratic' values in schooling settings. After all, to be a democratic subject is not about following and conforming to a set of fixed canon, but critical engagement with the hegemonic power-knowledge interplays. We therefore propose that, in addition to freedom, justice and equality, the notion of democratic education in global 21st century contexts can also be discursively associated with other qualities including those which are contextual, cultural, philosophical, aesthetic, environmental, ethical, and spiritual; and such qualities should be continuously questioned, reconfigured, and reworked.

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