

Student Authorial Agency in the Three Educational Paradigms: Conventional, Progressive, and Democratic



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The Student Authorial Agency

The authorial agency is a person's creative transcendence of the given culture, given nature, given history recognized as such by other people and/or the person Themself (Matusov, 2011). This transcendence can occur on the macro and micro scales: as a creative transformation of the Big Culture recognized by and affecting millions of people as a historical event or as a biographical event noticed by a few people locally (Bakhtin, 1986, 1999; Bibler, 2009; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2016). The authorial agency is what defines the person: their deeds, their responsibility, their life events, their reputation, and what kind of person they are. It defines us as humans. It makes us unpredictable, uncalculatable, and unfinalizable (Bakhtin, 1999; Nancy, 1991; Nikulin, 2010). The authorial agency is the surplus that remains after everything that is able to predict, determine, and calculate us is bracketed out (Bakhtin, 1986). The authorial agency is transient, ephemeral, intangible, dialogic, and problematic: it is in the eye of the beholder. It may be noticed by some at a certain time and be disputed by others—recognition and evaluation of the authorial agency in itself belong to the act of the authorial agency. The authorial agency is what is the most important about us (Lobok, 2014). It makes us unique and memorable. It defines us as the authors of our own life.

Ironically, probably with the exception of history, social sciences often neglect to study the authorial agency, focusing on reoccurring structural–functional patterns of behavior, discourse, actions, feelings, attitudes, etc.—so-called objective subjectivity (cf. "sociocultural positivism," Matusov, 2023c). My colleagues and I argue that the authorial agency is possible to study only dialogically by engaging in a dialogue about

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its recognition, meaning, and evaluation (Matusov et al., 2019a, 2019b; Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, Kullenberg, & Curtis, 2019a, 2019b; Matusov, 2018, 2023c).

Most of our societal institutions, including educational ones, do not support or recognize people's authorial agency. Mapping the notion of agency in education, my colleagues and I abstracted, examined, and criticized three major types of the notion of agency besides authorial: 1) agency as capacity, 2) agency as effort, 3) the dynamically emergent agency (i.e., agency without an agent) (Matusov et al., 2016). The ubiquitous neglect of the authorial agency is a result of the focus of our civilization on survival and economic stability at the expense of self-actualization, leisure, freedom, and exploration (Matusov, 2020a). Still, even under the current oppressive conditions, the authorial agency remains omnipresent, although often distorted, oppressed, and neglected.

Three Educational Paradigms for the Student Authorial Agency

In this theoretical essay, I want to explore the life of the student authorial agency under the following three diverse educational philosophical conditions: (1) Conventional Education, (2) Progressive Education, and (3) Democratic Education. Conventional Education, common for the mainstream educational institutions, is a totalized paternalistic education aiming at making the students predictably arrive at the usually well-defined curricular endpoints preset by the educational authority mostly using behavioristic means. Progressive Education is also totalized paternalistic education, but it invites and actively exploits and manipulates the students' authorial agency to achieve its often ill-defined paternalistic educational goals preset by the educational authorities. Progressive Education is common for many (but not all) innovative schools (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, progressive schools, Open Classroom, Free schools). Democratic Education, on the other hand, assumes that the student is the final authority for their own education, who defines whether to study, what to study, how to study, for what purpose to study, with whom to study, when to study, and so on.¹ Examples of Democratic Education are, most famously, Summerhill school (UK) and Sudbury Valley School (USA), some types of homeschooling, and their diverse followers throughout the world. These three major diverse educational paradigms constitute the landscape of modern institutionalized education. Their practical attitudes toward the student authorial agency reflect the livability of people there and define the vector of their development.

¹ These decisions are made alone or together and with the help of peers and/or professional educators (school staff).

Defining Education and Learning

In order to explore these philosophical conditions, it is critical to briefly unpack the differences between education and learning, for which one cannot be reduced to the other (Arcilla, 2020). Not all learning is education, and not all education is learning. Education, in my view, is a person's positive evaluation of the own transformation of their subjectivity noticed by the person² alone or with the help of other people. On the other hand, learning is an experience-based transformation of a person's subjectivity that may or may not be noticed or positively valued by the person. Alternative to learning, there are insights, which are abrupt shifts in the person's subjectivity, which are not necessarily caused by experiences. Unfortunately, insights are not currently recognized in many modern cultures, but they used to be before as "revelations," "epiphanies," etc. To become educational, insights, like learning, must be recognized and valued by the person. We live in the constant flow of learning and insights, most of which remain unnoticed by us. In contrast, education is eventful and dialogic and involves the person's reflection and value judgment (Matusov, 2021b).

Conventional Education

I argue that teaching and learning are authorial in any pedagogy, even in both *conventional* and some *innovative* pedagogies. Although my position may sound paradoxical, especially when applied to conventional education, which often neglects, if not openly suppresses, student authorial agency, the educational agency of conventional, technological pedagogy can be characterized as bounded by the Assignment Chronotope³ (Matusov, 2009, 2015a). Seen in these terms, *ideologically* (i.e., as a desired ideal) in Conventional Education, both the students' and the teacher's authorial agency is aimed at the students' arriving at the usually well-defined curricular endpoints preset by the teacher (and often by the State via curricular standards, tests, and exams). The espoused role of all participants' agency is viewed as instrumental and non-authorial in this process—as the students' desire and self-discipline to unconditionally cooperate with the teacher and the school institution.

Conventional Education ideologically does not completely dismiss the student's authorial agency. Instead, it postpones it until after "education is over," when the student is fully equipped with the necessary toolkit of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. After school is done, the students can do what they want—e.g., realize their

² I try to avoid using the English common term "individual" because it is atomistic. Unfortunately, I cannot find in English a good analogue to the Slavic term "lichnost'" ("личность") that encompasses a particular unity that cannot be reduced to the individual or the social. Lichnost' starts with a person's taking responsibility/answerability for their own deeds (and words) against challenges of these deeds (and words) by other people and the person themselves (Bakhtin, 1993). In this essay, I often use the English term "person" in place of the Russian term "lichnost'."

³ Bakhtin (1991) defined his notion of "chronotope" as a unity of time, space, and values in which events unfold.

authorial agency. Inside the conventional school, the students' agency is limited to the accumulation of the capacities defined by the school (i.e., agency as capacity) and to actively put their efforts into this accumulation (i.e., agency as effort) (Matusov et al., 2016). In a conventional school, students must be *willing* participants in unconditional cooperation with the teacher's assignments (Matusov, 2015a)—from homework, to taking notes, to being seated quietly, to not talking with a friend during a lesson, to attending to studying the prescribed curriculum, to following the teacher's arbitrary rules, and so on. Specifically, students must be willing to participate in the following major actions:

- A. Do unconditionally what the teacher asks you to do.
- B. Try to understand correctly what the teacher wants from you (the correctness is defined by the teacher).
- C. Put all your efforts, industry, eagerness, intelligence, and diligence toward what the teacher assigns as well and as much as possible, based on the teacher's judgment of what "well" and "much" mean.
- D. Censor your own agendas, desires, genres, interests, needs, and actions that are not sanctioned by the teacher.
- E. Restrain and do not support other students who disrupt and deviate from the teacher's assignments.
- F. Postpone your self-actualization and goal-defining processes until the "grown-up" future, when education is over (or at least when the school day is over, and you are outside of the school time and space, outside of the school Assignment Chronotope) (cf. student as "a half-being"; see Sidorkin, 2002, pp. 42–43).
- G. Sincerely believe in and actively desire to do A–F (cf. the Foucauldian notion of student as "an educated subject," Fendler, 1998).

The main goal of Conventional Education is to discipline people to become convenient, obedient, and useful for society—i.e., "disciplinary society," in which all its citizens are obedient to the authority, useful, and pleasant (Kant, 1803/2012; O'Neill, 1986). In short, ideologically, in Conventional Education, the student's agency is about becoming a *willing instrument* for the teacher's instruction, who themselves are often viewed instrumentally by the State (Fendler, 1998). The student normative authorship in Conventional Education can be characterized as *teacher-pleasing authorship*—creative contributions by the student to anticipate and please the teacher's desires. The ultimate goal of Conventional Education is "a useful citizen" (Stirner, 1842)—i.e., a citizen who can be successfully used, controlled, and managed by the "disciplinary society" (Foucault, 1995).

Of course, this is only an *ideological* normative construct of student authorial agency desired by the conventional educational institution. The reality of student authorial agency in Conventional Education usually involves diverse and, at times, complicated scenarios. There is a typology of student authorial agency in Conventional Education. The conventional students can actively cooperate with the teacher's demands, game the system, resist the demands, or actively initiate something outside of the teacher's demands (smuggle their own interests, activities, and needs). The teacher can qualify the students' initiatives as resistance and punish them, can approve

the students' initiatives (and, thus, the teacher sanctions those initiatives, usually when they go along with the teacher's overall preset curricular endpoint), simply not notice the students' deviating actions, or can notice but decide to ignore the students' self-initiated activities. However, in a conventional classroom, a teacher rarely invites the students' self-actualization and goal-defining to inform curriculum, instruction, and organization of the classroom collective, probably because, in the teacher's view, such activism may jeopardize their timely arrival at curricular endpoints preset by the teacher (Kennedy, 2005) and/or can be seen as challenging teacher authority (Sidorkin, 2002). As a result, many conventional students learn a hidden curriculum of not having their own interests in the academic endeavors of their own (Morrison, 2012).

Although it can be easier to envision students' authorship in their resistance and initiative to do something beyond the teacher's demands (smuggling), it might be less clear to see students' creative transgression and improvisational extension of any limits in their willing obedience to and unconditional cooperation with the teacher's assignments (in a broader sense of this term; see above). "Creative unconditional obedience" sounds like a misnomer, but it is not. A student's sophisticated ability to understand any arbitrary teacher demands, submit to teacher-driven assignments, and foresee the teacher's criteria to define success requires creativity from the student. However, this creativity is peculiar and perverse, denying its value. *It is creativity on how to be non-creative*. It is an agency creatively striving to act as a willing non-agency and creatively pretending to be an instrument and machine (even a so-called "smart machine"). Often those conformists, "good students," creatively employ pattern-recognition and pattern-production strategies to correctly guess and satisfactorily please their teachers' behavioral, cognitive, axiological, communicative, and other arbitrary demands. The pattern-recognition and pattern-production processes are calibrated by the reward-punishment system feedback in somewhat similar ways to how Alexa or Siri respond to user speech, although they can also use reasoning in addition to that (Matusov, 2020b).

Consequences of a Conventional Education Paradigm

Kennedy (2005) reported in her research that many teachers in conventional schools are concerned their students are not 100% on the tasks defined by the teacher (i.e., *off-task*), suggesting that students are expected to be focused on tasks and goals not defined by the student 100% of the time. However, these teachers are even more concerned with the fact that even when the students are on their tasks, the students are often *off-script*—i.e., the student's contributions to the teacher's task violate the teacher's expectations. Often when the students' contributions are perceived as off-script, the teacher suppresses the students' activity (Kennedy, 2005), suggesting that deviations from expectations are problems to be corrected.

This suppression of the students' authorial agency is a common negative outcome of Conventional Education. Many students at conventional schools lose the connection with their own ontology in the vast fields of academic activities—and as such, their inventiveness, curiosity, and connection to content. As a result, students often lose interest in academic subjects (Jackson, 1968; Tenenbaum, 1940). Yazzie-Mintz (2006) found that 50% of US high school students are bored *every day* in their classes. Hart (2006) reported that 82% of California 9th and 10th graders perceived their overall school experiences as “boring and irrelevant.” In our own research of alumni of an innovative progressive school who went to conventional high schools, the alumni reported on this suppression of their academic agencies as they could compare the regimes of their past innovative progressive and current conventional schools—as one alumni reports, “[A conventional] school sucks all life out of me” (DePalma et al., 2009).

Young children are often full of self-initiated activities even though they can occasionally be bored, which probably means that they strive for an extension of their authorial agency. As Indian educator, Sugata Mitra powerfully demonstrated, by giving unschooled children of different ages living in slums computers mounted on the wall, the children quickly progressed in learning computers, the Internet, and diverse academic subjects even without much adult guidance or even when they did not speak English (the language of the computers and Internet) (Mitra, 2006). In this case, students can accomplish vast learning within the space of activities controlled by their own authorial agencies.

In a less dramatic and more systematic case, Llewellyn (1993) reports an interesting but sad phenomenon that she referred to as “school intoxication,” when children who shift from mainstream conventional schools to democratic homeschooling, with its focus on self-initiated activities and responsibility for the student's own learning, refuse to initiate any activities for some time (cf. Neill, 1960). She calls for parents' patience to give the children time for “school detoxication” and to recover the students' agency for self-initiating activities. Sometimes, school detoxication takes 9 months or even more for students to reignite their self-generated authorship by doing nothing literally and boring themselves to death—the length of the time is usually proportional to the children's time spent in mainstream school, according to Llewellyn's observation. Based on his observation, Neill (1960, p. 4), the founder of the British democratic school Summerhill, hypothesized that one year of spending in a conventional school requires one month of school detoxification. This phenomenon requires further systematic research investigation.

Still, some students often promote their authentic education in Conventional Education despite the school and teachers' efforts or even those efforts. However, some conventional teachers either do not object to or resist the students' educational and life activism when the teachers become aware of it or even encourage and support it, which almost makes those teachers less conventional. Some teachers try smuggling Progressive or even Democratic Education into conventional educational institutions.

Progressive Education

Many innovative educational institutions are governed by the Progressive Education philosophical paradigm. In contrast to Conventional Education, which wants to bracket the student authorial agency from education and postpone it after the education is accomplished, Progressive Education acknowledges, encourages, and actively invites the student authorial agency in education in order to exploit and manipulate it (Matusov, 2022; Matusov et al., 2016). Progressive educators aim to hide their power and control over the students from their students and even, at times (ideologically), from themselves (see Morrison, 2007, p. 157, as a good example). As the father of Progressive Education, the French writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau advised a progressive educator,

... let him [i.e., your student -- EM] always think he is master while you are really master. There is no subjection so completed as that which preserves the forms of freedom; it is thus that the will [of the child] itself is taken captive [by the teacher's hidden manipulation]. Is not this poor child, without knowledge, strength, or wisdom, entirely at your mercy? Are you not master of his whole environment so far as it affects him? Cannot you make of him what you please? His work and play, his pleasure and pain, are they not, unknown to him, under your control? No doubt he ought only to do what he wants, but he ought to want to do nothing but what you want him to do. He should never take a step you have not foreseen, nor utter a word you could not foretell (Rousseau, 1979, p. 120, italics mine).

There are diverse teacher strategies of how to exploit the student's authorial agency, but in gist, they have involved an expansion of the student's interests and needs in order to include the curriculum desired by the teacher. There is also a typology of student authorial agency in Progressive Education. The literature on Progressive Education is full of Cinderella-like stories of academically disengaged, alienated, and/or rebellious students in the past only being miraculously awakened by a progressive educator (e.g., Cunningham, 2021; Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999; Rueda & Dembo, 1995; Rueda & Moll, 1994). For example, when a student is not interested in math but is interested in baseball, a teacher might show the student how math can be useful for assessing the strengths of the players and the probabilities of winning and losing games (see also, Chapter 24 by Esteban-Guitart et al. in this volume, for more examples). Instruction-oriented progressive educators often dream about their "holy grail": designing super-exciting learning activities that predictably draw all students in so they can enthusiastically study what the educator wants them to study (Matusov, 2022; Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, & Gradovski, 2019a, 2019b). Such a perspective on education draws heavily on the educational philosophy of John Dewey, who wrote:

If the subject-matter of the lessons be such as to have an appropriate place within the expanding consciousness of the child, if it grows out of his own past doings, thinkings, and sufferings, and grows into application in further achievements and receptivities, then no device or trick of method has to be resorted to in order to enlist "interest." The psychologized is of interest that is, it is placed in the whole of conscious life so that it shares the worth of that life (Dewey, 1902, p. 27).

This bait-and-switch strategy of engaging students in the curriculum imposed by society involves the skillful expansion of the student's interests and needs until it covers the curriculum desired by society. This progressive pedagogical approach can be called "imposed curriculum plus," where students are skillfully manipulated to study what society wants them to study (i.e., "imposed" part of the curriculum, the required minimum) while also allowing them to study what they want in addition to that (i.e., extracurricular or advanced "plus") (cf. Ravitch, 2014). A progressive science teacher reported about his two-stage instruction: the warm-up stage and the instructional stage. The "warm-up" stage involves engaging his students in a discussion of their science-related interests and concerns. The "instructional" stage involves direct teaching the preplanned science curriculum (Matusov et al., 2012; Smith, 2010).

The progressive imposition is often done in the form of the educator's hidden exploitation of the student authorial agency rather than in the form of direct and rather visible coercion or bribing as it is done in Conventional Education. One can hear Jean Jacques Rousseau's Progressive (somewhat cynical) mantra: "...let [the student] always think he is master while you are really master" (Rousseau, 1979, p. 120). In so doing, the Progressive Education system catalyzes the opportunity for the emergence of these naïve learners, who fail to recognize the manipulation imposed upon them, but also a variety of learners, whom, for one reason or another, acknowledge the manipulation but engage with its existence through complicity, resistance, creativity, ignorance, or compromise, to name a few.

Comparisons Between Progressive and Conventional Educational Paradigms

For two major reasons, Progressive Education's "imposed curriculum plus" pedagogical regime gives its students much more freedom and opportunity to engage in their own self-determined education than in the Conventional Education pedagogical regimes. First, Progressive Education legitimizes the student authorial agency (the "plus") for the student's self-actualization—not any self-actualization but only those that are approved by the progressive education (e.g., not mastering videogame playing or hanging out with friends but creating music or making robots). Second, Progressive Education tries to utilize the student authorial agency and the student's trust in the teachers to channel them to study what society wants them to study (the imposed societal curriculum, the minimum). For example, the teachers at the Albany Free School (a progressive school) "gently encourage students to take part in academics by offering exciting activities or lessons on the traditional disciplines... I, too, got into the habit of gently prodding kids to work on traditional academic disciplines, mainly when they first expressed an interest, but then didn't follow up. I have mentioned the case of Lawrence [a student] being interested in survival themes

and how I finally led him to read *Hatchet* with me after numerous offers on my part”—Morrison has called “gentle podding” (Morrison, 2007, p. 131).

When “gentle prodding” does not work because the student either ignores or resists it, engagement-oriented progressive educators often reserve to more forceful “pushing,” such as: (a) openly employing totalized educational paternalism (more typically ascribed to Conventional Education), (b) imaging themselves as being parents of the students (Morrison, 2007, pp. 133–136), (c) moralizing classroom management through guilt, and (d) enforcement of a learning surveillance system (Cunningham, 2021; Matusov, 2023b). Finally, progressive educators often play politics to manipulate students during “democratic” decision-making into governing rules desired by progressive educators (e.g., Morrison, 2007, pp. 69, 105).

Successes of a Progressive Educational Paradigm

Progressive pedagogical success in terms of genuine education discussed above occurs when the student perceives the imposed societal curriculum as their own choice: (1) as a part of their self-actualization (e.g., a student likes to write stories and thus studies English academic school curriculum, appreciated by a broader society), (2) an introduction of fun and entertaining learning activities, through fascination in and raising curiosity about some aspects of the traditional academic curriculum, (3) exploitation of the student’s anxieties about traditional educational institutions the student has or wants to join in the future, or 4) as an annoying but necessary part of life or career trajectory the student has freely chosen (e.g., a preparation for the Scholastic Aptitude Test, required by many American colleges) (Cunningham, 2021; Hahn & Korngiebel, 2019; Matusov et al., 2019a, 2019b; Morrison, 2007; Rueda & Dembo, 1995; Rueda & Moll, 1994; Sidorkin, 2009).

Consequences of a Progressive Educational Paradigm

At the same time, Progressive Education distorts the student authorial agency in several ways. First, Progressive Education insists on the centrality of learning (rather than self-determined education), which positions students as learning machines and “half-beings” (Sidorkin, 2002, pp. 42–43). According to Sidorkin, the half-being is a normative societal identity, an expression of ageism, “oriented toward the [child’s or student’s] future, and therefore an identity that undervalues the [child’s or student’s] present” (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 42). Treating students as half-beings, where the student’s future is overvalued while the student’s present is undervalued, is the birthmark of Conventional and Progressive Education.

The problem with Conventional and Progressive Education is that this positive evaluation of the transformation of subjectivity is done *not* by the educatee but by somebody else, be it teachers, schools, politicians, parents, or others. This is what

makes Conventional and Progressive “Education” not truly educational—they steal this evaluation from the educatees (Matusov, 2021).

Third, education cannot and must not be purified, abstracted, and separated from other human endeavors, especially from a person’s endeavors of self-actualization. The Greek word “school” (σχολείο) originally meant a particular form of “leisure” (σχολή) in Ancient Greece⁴ (Arendt, 1958). Examining literature on leisure, I identified four major types of leisure: play, hobby, hanging out with friends, and intrinsic education for self-actualization (Matusov, 2020a). School as leisurely education must be embedded in other leisure forms as in Democratic Education.

Fourth, progressive educators impose the societal curriculum on their students. The student’s critical attitudes (1) against curricular impositions, (2) against the particular societal curriculum, and (3) toward finding ways of circumventing and/or actively fighting these impositions are discouraged and even actively suppressed in Progressive Education. In this regard, Progressive Education abandons or, at least, severely compromises the educational goal of a critical examination of life and education itself, expressed in the famous motto by Socrates: “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Finally, fifth, progressive educators’ manipulation and exploitation of the student authorial agency compromise the human foundation and the fiduciary duty defining the educator-educatee personal and professional relationships (Matusov, 2024b). This undermines the students’ trust in their educators as people who are genuinely interested in them and fully committed to helping them rather than to the needs of society. Thus, it jeopardizes the educators’ quality of guidance and the students’ desire to ask for help.

Democratic Education

In contrast, the Democratic Education non-paternalistic paradigm offers an alternative by treating students as full-beings here and now. Democratic Education is self-education where students are viewed as the final authority for their own life and education (Matusov, 2023a, 2024a; Rietmulder, 2019; Rietmulder & Marjanovic-Shane, 2023; Shugurova et al., 2022). In Democratic Education, the student decides whether to study, why (what for) to study, what to study, how to study, with whom to study, when to study, where to study, what is the study success, whether it was

⁴ Ancient Greek school was envisioned only for free people. According to Aristotle (2000), free people are people whose life is not primarily shaped by their life necessities, concerns about survival, health, or orders by other, more powerful people (Arendt, 1958). In the time of Aristotle, slaves, peasants, artisans, traders, artists, women, the sick, and children were not viewed as free people. In Ancient Athens, affluent boys did not attend “school” in this leisurely understanding of this term but were engaged in training (Bloomer, 2015). Of course, Aristotle’s notion of freedom was based on and constituted by slavery, exploitation, ageism, sexism, and patriarchy. The emergence of technological unemployment may create economic conditions for schools as a form of leisure on a mass scale (Matusov, 2020a).

successful study, and so on. The student can make these important educational decisions solely, with the help of other educatees, the advice/guidance of an educatee (or peers, or parents). Education is understood as self-determined education. Thus, the concept of self-determined education breaks with the long-lasting tradition of the Enlightenment to define education as a public *instrument* for the betterment of society (see, for example, Kant, 1784, who articulated this Enlightenment view).

The crucial element of democratic education is that the educatee controls and defines their own education even when delegating some aspects of their education to others (e.g., peers, advisors, teachers, education enforcers). Any educational arrangements with others are conditional to approval and change by the educatee at any time, remaining in charge of their own education at this meta-level of decision-making (Matusov, 2024b).

In contrast to Conventional and Progressive Education, Democratic Education does not focus on its pedagogy or creating a so-called “community of learners” focused on promoting the purification of learning (Matusov et al., 2012), but rather on the organization of a democratic, self-governed, “scaled-down society” of the school (Matusov, 2024a; Rietmulder, 2019). In a democratic school, a student is affirmed “to make decisions about what was best for me” (Cunningham, 2021, p. 36). Some of these life and education decisions are personal, affecting only the student, and, thus, are private, in the full authority of the student (i.e., a bubble of protected personal autonomy, so-called “negative liberty,” Berlin, 2017). Some decisions are interpersonal, affecting a small group of the participants (i.e., students and school staff) and, thus, are collective, the subject of formal and informal negotiations by all involved (and, at times, involved invited mediators). Some decisions are corporeal, affecting an established and recognized corporation and the subject of its governance specified by the corporation’s by-laws. Some decisions are societal, affecting the entire scale-down society (the democratic school) and, thus, are the subject of democratic school governance via the legislation of new school rules (e.g., school assembly). Some decisions may affect the intergenerational future, as well as unknown and unrepresented generations of the democratic school (e.g., accumulating the current funds for future construction of a new school building). Some decisions may be intersocietal (e.g., The Circle School decided to use the “all gender” signs for the school one-cabin-room restrooms in a violation of the local Uniform Construction Code in Pennsylvania at that time, the school successfully appealed to the Uniform Construction Code (UCC) Board of Appeals, affecting 40 + municipalities in the area⁵).

⁵ “The Building Codes Officer denied the school the Occupancy Permit required to open the new building for use. The denial was legally “correct” because the restroom signs said “All Gender Restroom” instead of designating a gender for each restroom as building codes require (at the national, state, and local levels). All the restrooms are for single-use (i.e., having only one set of fixtures, instead of partitioned stalls and multiple fixtures), but the relevant building codes make no distinction. The school filed an appeal of the denial with the UCC Board of Appeals (with a filing fee of \$750). The appeal was presented in writing and then made in a public hearing before a panel of six building code officers from other municipalities. Although the process is typically an adversary proceeding—with the local officer arguing one side and the appellant the other—ours

Democratic self-determined education schools are very sensitive to educators' manipulation and exploitation of the student authorial agency to channel it toward the "good public causes" (i.e., "positive liberty," Berlin, 2017)—(e.g., critical thinking, social justice, employability, preparation for college, basic skills, et cetera).⁶ In a democratic school, good causes (public or personal) can be freely adopted by its particular members or groups, but they must not be imposed on the entire scaled-down society of the school (Greenberg, 1992; Matusov, 2024a; Rietmulder, 2019), leading some students to even complain that the culture has created a fear of giving advice and assistance from adults to the student (Gray et al., 2021). At times, this concern of adult impositions leads democratic educators to ban any unsolicited initiation, sharing, or initiative of activity, guidance, or interest by the school staff to the students (e.g., Greenberg, 1992; Hartkamp, 2016; Neill, 1960; Rietmulder, 2019), which can be a bit excessive (Matusov, 2015b, 2024b). Indeed, an educator's sharing of interests and excitement with the students can be legitimate and beneficial, positioning a democratic educator as an educatee among other educatees.

Leisure Within a Democratic School

In a democratic school, education as a particular form of leisure is not purified from but rather embedded into other forms of leisure: hanging out with friends, engaging in hobbies and projects of interest, playing, and so on (Matusov, 2020a). Although education always occurs within the other forms of leisure such as play or hobby, for example, leisurely intrinsic education can become its own sphere recognized by the educatee as a sustained pursuit of the educatee's curiosity (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2019; Matusov et al., 2017). At the same time, students might engage in instrumental learning such as preparing for taking the SAT or training. A student can assign some learning or set themselves on an educational journey. In contrast to Progressive Education, Democratic Education does not try to increase or primarily focus on learning (aka "learnification"). Also, it does not exclusively focus on purposeful, productive activity (e.g., projects) over being or relationships (e.g., playing, hanging

wasn't really adversarial. We didn't assert that the officer made the wrong decision; rather, we argued that the code should allow all-gender single-use restrooms, and they should, therefore, grant us a variance—something no building code officer has the authority to do. The appeals board appeared to readily agree with us and granted us the variance. Because the appeals board represents a council of cooperating governments, the variance applies generally to 40 + municipalities in our region of Pennsylvania" (Jim Rietmulder, July 27, 2024, email, see also, <https://www.capitalregioncog.org/sites/g/files/vyhlf2901f/minutes/7-17-17-minutes.pdf>).

⁶ Monopoly on "good causes" defines the normative *positive* liberty, so criticized by Berlin (2002) because it often leads to totalitarianism. The maxim of the normative positive liberty is "Liberty must serve the preestablished good public causes."

out with friends). In contrast to Conventional and Progressive Education, Democratic Education educators do not design education—pedagogizing,⁷—but rather create leisurely conditions for its emergence.

Democratic education, thus, can be defined as students practicing life in a *scaled-down* democratic *leisurely* society (Rietmulder, 2019). The school society is *scaled-down* because this society does not have full sovereignty over its decision-making, being embedded in the full-scale sovereign society of the United States of America, and children do not have the full rights of adults within the larger society. The life of the scaled-down democratic society is not burdened by students' concerns about necessities, demands, assignments, survival, obligations, and orders, but rather, it is essentially open for the students' self-realization, self-determination, and self-actualization. Of course, the necessities are always lurking: mess has to be cleaned up, safety has to be assured, rules have to be followed, the budget must be balanced, and governing decisions must be made. But these necessities are aimed at creating conditions for practicing life based on promoting the participants' self-actualization.

Negative Liberty Within the Democratic Educational Paradigms

Violating the democratically accepted school rules by students and the school staff is expected, normalized, and generally not moralized or demonized (Matusov, 2025). Violations of democratically established school rules are not bracketed from education but rather are viewed as a crucial part of education and school life. Any member of the scale-down society (i.e., a student or staff member) can initiate a judicial process by accusing another member (i.e., a student or staff) of violating an existing school rule by writing a special “write-up” ticket (older members of the school help younger students who cannot write well yet). In response to the accusation, a special Judicial Committee is formed consisting of the members of the schools, and a standard, judicial process occurs (or can be settled through mediation). In the end, the sentence is proclaimed, and the punishment, if any, is issued. In some rare but important cases (e.g., expulsion, appeal), the matter may be moved to the entire school assembly for the final decision. At times, a particular case may lead to a proposal for the rule change—any school member can initiate a process of the rule change at the school assembly (Greenberg, 1992; Neill, 1960; Rietmulder, 2019).

Based on respect for their students' self-determined education, the school exists for the students and not vice versa. The school rules—i.e., the limitation of personal “negative liberty⁸”—are viewed as an imperfect balance among different freedoms

⁷ The term was recently coined by Russian educator Artyom Fyodorov to capture the focus of Conventional and Progressive Education on teacher's pedagogy at expense students' educational self-determination.

⁸ The *negative* normative liberty, the liberty of setting constraints, can be defined by the following maxim: “Anything that is not explicitly forbidden is allowed.” This contrasts with the *positive*

and other concerns, subject to democratic governance, negotiation, and change. When many rules accumulate through the past generations of students and these rules lose their initial meaning and purpose, many school members start feeling that the tyranny of rules and school bureaucracy has emerged. In some schools, it leads to a revolt from time to time when the school assembly votes for abandoning all rules, the experience of chaos, and starting with establishing new rules all over again from scratch (e.g., in Summerhill, Neill, 1960) or, at least, a serious revision of all rules by a specially appointed school committee cleaning the school rulebook from the obsolete rules (e.g., in The Circle School, Rietmulder, 2019).

Since Democratic Education is committed to the negative normative liberty and is repelled from the positive normative liberty, there is no typology of the student authorial agency as it is in Conventional and Progressive Education—the students at democratic schools are free to pursue their self-actualization by transcending any given cultural, political, religious, educational, ideological ends, goals, and values within certain boundaries democratically set by the school rules through “practicing life” (Rietmulder, 2019). The students can self-actualize themselves in play, in hanging out with their friends, in their hobbies and purposeful projects, in the school and corporative democratic governance, in the organization of the activities and life at the school (and beyond), in the pursuit of their own curiosities, interests, inquiries, critical examinations, creative socializations, needs, and so on, in dialogues with their peers and staff, in being together, in making decisions about their life (and education), in interpersonal problem solving, in evaluating and redesigning the school life, and more.

Limitations of Democratic Education

Finally, there are a few major limitations of authorial agency by democratic self-determined education beyond the external limitations listed above. Democracy as a form of societal government is often imperfect in a variety of ways, and this remains true for democratic self-determined education (Matusov, 2025). Skillful participation in a democracy requires particular sociocultural skills and access to information and other resources. The giving up of power is so socially uncomfortable that an unsuccessful coup attempt by parents to seize control of the school in order to have control over the curriculum, led to the parents disenrolling their children from the school at such high amounts that the school had to close due to financial instability (Wilson, 2017).

Unconditional subordination to democratic rules and laws demanded by democracy might promote personal irresponsibility, such as when students report how staff’s personal fear of giving too much guidance can lead to a lack of direction and assistance, even when explicitly asked for by the student (Gray et al., 2021; Matusov,

normative liberty, the liberty aimed at achieving a particular preset goal: “Anything that is not explicitly allowed is forbidden.”

2025). For example, Wilson (2017) reports on how informal power dynamics, participation, and rule-breaking and enforcing was utilized within the School Meetings at the democratic Central Valley Sudbury School in California to silence younger students and women, and early attempts at Democratic Schools in Norway and Sweden found limited engagement in School Meetings and social shame if one held a dissenting opinion (Marjanovic-Shane et al., 2023). Parents report social shame and confusion when explaining how they send their children to these schools (Gray & Riley, 2013), suggesting that even the larger societal context may inhibit the promotion of these alternative forms of learning.

Finally, Democratic Education is a victim of the system in which it finds itself. Democratic Education *is* caged by the State's oppressive requirements (e.g., compulsory education), the powerful tentacles of totalized credential institutionalism (e.g., passing college entrance exams or the SAT), the instrumentalization of life by the economy, capitalist exploitation, oppression by state and institutional bureaucracy, and the mainstream views on education and life (e.g., totalized instrumental perspectives on education) (Matusov, 2023b). Others have argued that even Democratic Education-based schools Democracy is often vulnerable to dirty politics, informal power, visible and invisible prejudices, and social manipulations. At times, the voice of "the future generation" may not be represented in democracy. Finally, democratic schools have been unable to truly separate themselves from the neoliberal constraints of individual improvement instead of a radical transformation toward collective benefits (Wilson, 2017).

Conclusions

Normatively, Conventional Education expects the students to postpone their authorial agency until they graduate from school while remaining in "the agentic state" (Milgram, 1974) by unconditionally obeying the school authority. This norm generates a repertoire of the student's creative responses varying from creative conformism (i.e., learning to be creatively uncreative), creative passing by (i.e., how to smuggle their own activities without attracting the school authority's attention), and creative rebelliousness (i.e., how to creatively fight the system) to creative open pushing their authorial learning. The student authorial agency is illegitimate in Conventional Education. This is often true also for the teacher's authorial agency because the conventional teacher is often viewed as a pedagogical technician, a conduit of "best, research-based, practices," "curricular standards," and state regulations.

In contrast, in Progressive Education, educators welcome and use the student authorial agency. The progressive educators manipulate, channel, and exploit the student authorial agency to engage the student in "good learning" predefined by the progressive educators. Good learning may involve students' creative socialization in the practices recognized, respected, and approved by society, such as writing poetry, solving difficult math problems, or pursuing scientific inquiries. It may also involve learning the traditional academic curriculum and successfully passing exams.

In response to the demands of Progressive Education, the student authorial agency is domesticated to fit its societal demands and values in Progressive Education. The progressive teacher is often viewed as a charismatic master of such virtuoso manipulation, invisible to the student, that powerfully draws the student into desired learning.

In Democratic Education, the student authorial agency is welcomed and affirmed as the primary source of the student's self-determined education and ownership of their life. Students make decisions about their own education alone or with the help of others: whether to study, why to study, what to study, when to study, with whom to study, where to study. Schooling is defined as practicing life in a scaled-down, democratic, leisurely society. In Democratic Education, the student authorial agency is not typified but rather open for the student's creativity, constrained by the democratically established school rules and distorted by the broader society in which the democratic school is embedded. When asked for help, a democratic educator has a pedagogical fiduciary duty toward the student's involved in self-determined education (Matusov, 2024b).

Both Conventional and Progressive Education define the student authorial agency positively as their active engagement in "the good learning" predefined by the educators (i.e., "positive liberty," see Berlin, 2017). In contrast, Democratic Education promotes conditions for the student's self-defined education limited by minimum democratically defined constraints of collective being and imposed demands by the State (i.e., "negative liberty," see Berlin, 2017). The negative freedom affirms the student authority agency in its full (but limited) creativity.

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