



Dialogic pedagogy in democratically run schools: Introduction



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Abstract

The introduction to this special issue has the particular purpose of presenting the philosophical and educational approach of democratic schooling and its practices to readers interested and knowledgeable in Dialogic Pedagogy but without enough information about Democratic education. Namely, many scholars of dialogic pedagogy are not very familiar with democratic schooling, if at all. The term “democratic education” is polysemic (Matusov, 2023), and many educationalists use it to refer to civic education in conventional schools. However, in this special issue, we explore the relationships between dialogic pedagogy and democratically run schools. In the article, I describe democratic education and its current spread and scarcity worldwide. Next, I examine the meaning and the uses of Dialogue in conventional and progressive education. Finally, I introduce the questions about the meaning and values of dialogic pedagogy in democratic education that guided us in putting together this Special Issue.

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There are people I never met, but I feel like I know them well, without whom I would never have understood the depths and intricacies of starting a democratic school in a very traditional, conventional state educational system. I am incredibly thankful to the late Mosse Jørgensen, the first school leader and the first students of the Experimental Gymnasium of Oslo in 1967. Jørgensen's book (the parts of which are translated and republished in this Special Issue) sparked my curiosity about the first Scandinavian democratic school. I wish I could say "thank you" to the students of that first class whose voices helped me glimpse important ideas about democratic education and what it can mean to different people.



Introduction

There is a specific purpose for an additional introduction to this Special Issue of the Dialogic Pedagogy Journal. It is to present the philosophical and educational approach to democratic schooling and its practice, especially to readers who, although knowledgeable in dialogic pedagogy, often lack enough information about democratic education. You see, when we at *Dialogic Pedagogy Journal* sent a call for proposals for this Special issue concerning dialogic pedagogy and democratic education, we experienced a problem we did not expect. We were surprised and astonished when the majority of the proposals that arrived did not focus on democratic education at all! Instead, they focused on what could be better described as *civic education for democracy* in the otherwise conventional and even innovative progressive schools. In the subsequent correspondence with the authors of these proposals, we (the editors of the Special Issue) realized that many of these authors, who were dialogic pedagogy scholars, indeed, were not well acquainted with democratic schools, if at all. Some of them had barely heard about democratic schools. They did not know how these schools work in practice, nor were they knowledgeable of the democratic schools' educational philosophies, regardless of having heard of the widely known and acclaimed school Summerhill in England (Neill, 1960). So, when these dialogic pedagogy scholars received the call for papers on dialogic pedagogy and democratic education, many interpreted "democratic education" as *civic education for democracy* within conventional and progressive schools.

However, *civic education for democracy* within conventional and progressive education only teaches *about* democracy, its principles, values, rules, and conventions. At the same time, the students at these schools remain firmly subordinated to a hierarchical, patronizing educational regime. This is true both for the conventional, authoritarian schools and for the progressive, but no less hierarchical, authoritative schools. Despite their differences, conventional and progressive schools are founded on the same principle of "educational paternalism." The paternalism of conventional schooling is direct and autocratic: students have to obey the teacher's orders, comply with the rules that were instituted for them by the educational authorities, and work on the assignments they are charged with regardless of their own interests, needs, or opinions. Progressive schooling paternalism, on the other hand, is paternalism with a "soft glove" but not less hierarchical. First "formulated by Rousseau in his pedagogical novel 'Emile' and then justified by Kant: a progressive teacher wants the student to want what the teacher wants the student to want without the student noticing that" (Matusov, 2021a, p. 8). Although progressive education may democratize some areas (e.g., curriculum and instruction) to get the students personally involved and excited, its ultimate goal is to get each student to reach predefined endpoints. Its openness to the students' subjectivity, interests, and needs serves not the students' goals but to achieve its own goals in better and more humane ways – to make the students arrive at predefined curricular endpoints. In both conventional and progressive education, the students live in a hierarchical, non-democratic regime in which their voice (if they have it at all) never has an equal status with the voice of the educational authority. In other words, the hierarchical regime of conventional and progressive schools and their main principles and goals are incompatible with the philosophy of democratic schools, their governance, principles, and practice (see more below).

Why is the term “democratic education” so often used to describe educational practices in otherwise non-democratic progressive schools? As Matusov points out in his Conclusion to this Special issue (Matusov, 2023), the term “democratic education” is polysemic. It is used to name various forms of democratization of educational practice, including those in otherwise conventional or progressive, hierarchical schools with their authoritarian paternalistic regimes.

Furthermore, the same term, *democratic education*, is also used to describe education in democratic schools. But then, what are Democratic Schools?

What are democratic schools, and why are they not better known?

Democratic education fundamentally differs from conventional and progressive education in its philosophical approach to the student’s rights and the relationships between the students, teachers, and other participants in the educational practices. In contrast to the conventional and progressive educational approaches, in democratic schools, the students, teachers, administrators, and other participants have equal rights and power of decision-making about almost all issues of school governance and personal educational matters. There are, of course, differences between the students and the staff in regard to the obligations of the staff to “steward the program’s facilities, finances, and business” (The Circle School). However, the students at democratic schools have legitimate rights to make decisions about their personal lives and learning journeys within the school’s rules and regulations which are authored in a democratic way where each participant – the students and the staff alike – has “equal rights of voice and vote in matters of governance and the common good” (The Circle School). In a democratic school, “children and teenagers are accorded all the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship; [...] students truly practice, rather than just read about, the principles of free speech, free association, and freedom to choose their own activities; [...] students vote on the rules that affect them and serve on juries to try those accused of violating those rules. ... A democratic school [...] is a school where students are trusted to take responsibility for their own lives and learning and for the school community. At such a school, students choose their own activities and associate with whomever they please. If courses are offered, students are always free to take them or not. Most such schools accept students across a wide range of ages (commonly age four through the late teens) and do not segregate students by age so that students can learn from interacting with others who are older and younger than themselves.” (“Democratic Education,” 2022).

But democratic schools are rather rare in overall global schooling today. Depending on what is counted, democratic and the so-called “free schools,” in the widest sense of the term, exist in 44 countries on all continents (“Democratic Schools,” 2022) or, according to more strict accounts, in 10 countries (“List of democratic schools,” 2021). They represent just a tiny fraction of the educational institutions of each country, ranging from just one school per country to a maximum of 103 schools and learning centers in the USA (“Lists of Democratic Schools, Co-ops and Resource Centers,” 2022). However, 103 schools in the United States still represent less than 0.08% of about 130,930 public and private K-12 schools (Vlasova, 2021), or eight (8) democratic schools per 10,000 mainstream schools. It could be argued that the disparity would be even greater if one could calculate the percentage of students attending democratic schools since these schools tend to have less than 100 students (in the very generous calculation). In contrast, an estimate of the average school size in the USA is about 526 (Vlasova, 2021).

In most countries, democratic schools are not a part of the state-financed public school education, although there have been some exceptions, notably in Canada, Israel (“Democratic Education,” 2021), and Scandinavia (see more about the Scandinavian democratic school experiment in this special issue). The lack of public institutional support is not a coincidence. In the current global education, the so-called public schools are “public” by two different accounts. First, they are “public” because they are financed by the

taxpayers' funds, i.e., by the state. Second, they are "public" because they are obliged to adhere to a centrally designed educational philosophy and its programs, norms, and principles. And in most countries worldwide, the public educational philosophy is the philosophy of conventional, authoritative, hierarchical education, and potentially progressive education. However, democratic schools' philosophy defies the mainstream conventional and progressive educational values, norms, and principles. From the point of view of conventional and progressive education, the democratic approach to education is highly controversial, irrational, and potentially dangerous, even harmful for students. The crux of the controversy is the status of the students and their educational rights. In the mainstream conventional and progressive approaches to education, the student is regarded as a ward of the educational institution without legitimate freedoms in the matters of learning and education (and sometimes wider). Furthermore, "the mainstream and innovative schools heavily rely on foisted education. In those schools, students cannot choose whether to study or not to study – education is foisted on them. In addition to that, what students should study and even what they should learn is designed for the students and imposed on them" (Matusov, 2021b, p. E12). The students have no legitimate rights and even less opportunity to evaluate the educational process to which they are subjected. In many countries, the students have no right to move away from this process if and when they find it irrelevant, alienating, humiliating, and painful.

In contrast, democratic governance in education, like democratic governance in society, is based on power-sharing and equal rights of input of ideas and points of view – which is contradictory to the hierarchical, authoritarian regimes. In these schools, the students both learn about democracy and actively practice democracy. This opens up a whole new aspect or a sphere of education to the students that no other educational approach provides nor promotes, but that represents one of the crucial educational spheres: a metalevel of evaluation and assessment of education itself. Here students can legitimately engage in assessing what is for them good, useful, beautiful, practical, or none of that in their education. They can discuss these issues with their peers and adults and make decisions based on such deliberation. How does that look in practice, what are the pros and cons of engaging in this aspect of education, and what are its opportunities and obstacles? All of these are the issues we discuss in almost every article in this Special issue. Here we describe such democratic schools and practices rather than "democratic education" as civic education for democracy in the otherwise autocratic educational practices.

What is the place of Dialogic pedagogy in diverse educational approaches?

Dialogic pedagogy has a different status in different educational approaches. Ostensibly, the Conventional authoritarian school, in its traditional regime of the monologic transmission of knowledge and skills, does not recognize dialogue as such, nor does it acknowledge dialogue as an educational method. The predominant discourse pattern in these schools follows the monologic sequence of the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), where the teacher has "the last word" when interrogating a student and evaluating their answer. According to Bakhtin, who often used pedagogical examples to illustrate the monologism as an antithesis to dialogue,

In an environment of philosophical monologism, the genuine interaction of consciousnesses is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well. In essence, idealism knows only a single mode of cognitive interaction among consciousnesses: someone who knows and possesses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it and in error; that is, it is the interaction of a teacher and a pupil, which, it follows, can be only a pedagogical dialogue (Bakhtin, 1999).

In contrast, Progressive education, inspired originally by the philosophers of Enlightenment (Kant, Rousseau, Fichte), rebelled against the monologism of the traditional schools, arguing that the development of autonomous and rational people with dignity, the people must have opportunities to practice their

reasoning in a free exploration of their ideas. In an earlier publication, my coauthors and I claimed that according to Kant,

... the teacher must not force the truth on the students (except in religious education) but carefully guide them toward the universal truth through a public dialogic exploration of the students' errors and shortcomings. The teacher's power of persuasion must be based not on their epistemological or institutional authority, nor a system of rewards and punishment, nor on brutal force but rather on the power of reason, rationality, and the universality of the truth. Only through this self-persuasive process of the students' free exploration of their own imperfect reasoning, rationality, and knowledge, argued Kant, can the students' own rational device be formed. ... the students must have the freedom to reason, however imperfectly it might be, but not the freedom from reason (Shugurova, Matusov, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2022, p. E6).

Thus, dialogue is welcome in progressive education as a practice in which the students can test their ideas. However, at the same time, in progressive education, which is foisted upon the student in the name of developing their knowledge and reasoning, the goal is not to freely discuss the matters at hand completely. The goal of progressive education is the same as the goal of conventional education: the students should arrive at the known truths and values agreed upon by the already rational people, who are the experts and, thus, authorities in their respective domains of knowledge. The students may test their ideas, but not with full freedom: the caveat is that they must arrive at an agreement with the known truths prescribed by the curriculum, educational authorities, and experts – and, ultimately, they can then join The Big Dialogue of Cultures (Berlyand, 2009; Bibler, 2009), i.e., become “educated.” Thus, in progressive schools, the dominant type of discourse still remains an authoritarian, magisterial discourse (Bakhtin, 1991). Dialogue in these schools is controlled and limited. It is used strictly as a pedagogical instrument for injecting the students' reasoning into their path to the pre-set curricular end-points (Alexander, 2018; Fecho, Falter, & Hong, 2016; Lefstein & Snell, 2013; Skidmore, 2000; Skidmore & Murakami, 2016). Regardless of how tolerant of diverse opinions and ideas these schools might seem to be, the tolerance is always temporary and in the service of the achievement of the indisputable educational pre-determined truths and values, the knowledge of which the students will need to show to get a grade and graduate. As the Prussian Prince Frederick allegedly said and Kant agreed, “Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, only obey!” (Kant, 1784).

Ultimately, both the conventional and progressive educational philosophies are based on ideological monism¹ that is antithetical to the pluralism necessary for the genuine dialogue, in which it is legitimate and expected that “**a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world**, combine but are **not merged** in the unity of the event [co-being, transformative being together]” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 6). Proponents of dialogism in education have tried to overcome or circumvent the ideological, organizational, and axiological obstacles posed by monism in many interesting and important ways – both in practice and in theory (cf., Alexander, 2018; Alexander, 2019; Lefstein & Snell, 2013; Matusov, 2020a, 2020b, 2021c; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017; Segal, Pollak, & Lefstein, 2017, and others). However, what is considered to be educational dialogue that can be practiced in progressive education, must remain controlled and limited, specifically designed as an instrument of improvement of the predesigned student's educational journey, leading the student to predetermined, given truths and values.

But what are the place and the value of dialogue in democratic education? In contrast to both conventional and progressive education, in democratic education, the student could be considered a legitimate owner and author of their learning and life journey. Furthermore, as I mentioned above, a whole

¹ According to Isaiah Berlin, monism is a belief in the “the unity or harmony of human ends” (Berlin, 2002, p. 4)

new sphere of life (and learning) becomes open and reachable: the student in democratic schools has an opportunity to directly enter a sphere of civic governance of their school and their own life and affairs, a sphere that is to a large extent, if not almost completely, out of reach for the student of mainstream conventional and innovative, progressive schools (Greenberg, 1991, 1992; Neill, 1960; Rietmulder, 2009, 2019)². This change in the student's status has a potential of a ripple effect on almost all aspects of the student's learning, their appreciation of that learning, their examination of its meaning in their lives and relationships to others, and their actual lives. In our article in this special issue, Rietmulder and I discuss this point in great detail (see Rietmulder & Marjanovic-Shane, 2023).

The question is whether the student's legitimate status as a free person with equal rights of opinion and decision-making (in most matters of school life and education) also creates opportunities and conditions for dialogic pedagogy, a genuine possibility for the students to develop critical dialogic examinations of the world, of their life and learning, and of their desires, motivations, and values.

Democratic schools, with their democratic principles of pluralism of opinions, equal rights of participation of all (students and staff) in the school organization, decision-making, and promotion of students' self-determination and self-education (Greenberg, 1991, 1992; Matusov, 2020a; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017; Rietmulder, 2019; Shugurova et al., 2022) seem to have designed an educational ecology in which the participants with equal rights of input and decision-making can freely initiate and join the genuine critical, creative, ethical-ontological dialogue. However, this assumption has not been thoroughly examined.

There are many questions about the relationship between the ecology of democratic education and dialogic pedagogy. In many democratic schools, with their philosophy of students' self-education, there is not much focus on the teaching³ (Rietmulder, 2019), and thus, not much focus on teaching something through dialogue. If and when dialogue happens, is it "educational?" What would it mean that dialogue is educational? In progressive education, dialogic pedagogy is understood as a pedagogical instrument to teach some predefined curricular area, but if in democratic education, students do not have to focus on the same given topic jointly, why should they have a dialogue about it?

As I stated earlier, the main purpose of this Special issue has been to examine the ways dialogic education (in its widest sense) exists and can exist in democratic schools: What is the educational status of dialogue in democratic schools? What promotes and hinders dialogism, i.e., the synergies and the discords between democracy and dialogue? In what situations and what kinds of events do critical and creative dialogues thrive, and when are they unsupported, neglected, and maybe even suppressed?

The authors of this issue focused on examining diverse aspects of dialogicity and democracy: from descriptions of various dialogic and democratic practices, noticing many obstacles that dialogue and democracy in education encounter in our era, telling about the effects dialogicity and democracy in education can have on the students, on their schools, and on the larger society, through examining their multiple values and meanings and trying to abstract important, diverse and sometimes even contradictory worldviews lying behind them.

² In a recent National Public Radio podcast "A1" on January 6th, 2022, Dr. Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg of the Tufts University "Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement," discussed what their center termed "civic desert." It is a concept that describes "lack of access to all or most physical sites of democratic learning and practice in the community" claiming that such civic desert was experienced by more than 50% of youth and young people in the USA. <https://the1a.org/segments/after-the-riot-young-voters-on-the-state-of-our-democracy/>

³ This is not true for all democratic schools. For instance, oldest democratic school in Israel, in Hadera, organizes classes in many subjects, that are taught in a regular way – there are time-tables, etc. Although the students are free to choose what classes they want to go, or not to go, the classes are there, awaiting anyone interested.

As my dear co-editor, Eliane Fernandes Azzari, said in her introduction (Azzari, 2023), we might have had particular reasons for focusing on one or another way of examining dialogic pedagogy in democratic education and for creating a certain order among the articles in this Issue. But you, dear reader, may find other purposes and reasons to read them, searching for concepts and ideas of your own and finding your own way through the issue. And, of course, we would greatly appreciate your responses, ideas, critical analyses, and comments.

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