

Guest editorial: Reimagined ways of knowing, being and doing: understanding the value of a self-directed educational context

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Introduction

There seems to be a clear growth in interest worldwide in self-directed educational developments, where human motivation and student choice are central. This interest is marked by a recent growth, particularly in the USA but also internationally, of homeschooling (Banks *et al.*, 2023; Jamison *et al.*, 2023), including unschooling – a self-directed approach to homeschooling (Riley, 2018). A similar growth in interest in recent decades is seen in an increasing interest in self-directed education (SDE) as defined by the Alliance for SDE (*What Is Self-Directed Education?*, 2024) as: “Education that derives from the self-chosen activities and life experiences of the learner” (for a more elaborate explanation, see the guest editorial by Peter Gray in this issue). SDE spaces commonly encompass homeschooling environments or democratic schools, including Sudbury model schools and more personalized, agile learning centers (Gray, 2023).

In the summer of 2023, researchers in the field met online and discussed publication options for this area of alternative education research. Not many journals focus on this specific domain, making the space for researchers to publish in this area limited. As momentum increased, we arrived at the idea of providing a special issue around research into understanding of the value of an SDE context. We feel an urgency, given the many challenges we face in education globally, to explore more deeply the realms of other ways of knowing, being and doing in education, and in particular, in the commonly labeled “radical” educational approaches. Many of these approaches practice SDE. While it is relatively established in empirical science and practice that SDE approaches can provide an environment in which children can flourish and grow into adults with fulfilling education, jobs and careers (Gray and Chanoff, 1986; Greenberg *et al.*, 2005; Lucas, 2011; Gray and Riley, 2015; Morrison, 2022), there is a need for a deeper understanding of how and why they work. The conventional methods of assessment that occur in regular education are commonly not suitable for many SDE environments, which has resulted in state lawsuits, especially in Europe (Thomas, 2013). SDE environments need to be assessed and understood differently and we hope that more research can contribute to the acceptance of SDE as an established alternative to existing conventional education systems.

This editorial note starts by providing the background and reasons behind the special issue and then presents an overview of the included research articles.

Background

We live in uncertain times. Every day we are confronted with news about, among other things, uncertain geopolitical situations, violence and longer-term existential threats such as

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climate change. Closer to home, we see that long-held traditions and commonly accepted certainties are slowly disappearing. Politically and economically, we may have reached the limits of what our current systems can handle. One psychological reaction in times of crisis is that people resist change (Jost, 2015). We see this reflected in the Western world where we continue to reproduce discourses of individualism, competition, scarcity and hierarchy. But it has become apparent that it is time to embrace change.

We hope this issue can contribute to a renewed focus on a centuries-old educational tradition, which centers around children's capacities to educate themselves, such as Tolstoy's Peasant School (1859–1862), Bronson Alcott's Temple School (1834–1841), Homer Lane's Little Commonwealth reform school (1912–1918), Ferrer's Modern School movement (1910–1960), A. S. Neill's Summerhill School (1921–present), the free school movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the growing homeschooling movement. Building on the legacy of these masters, the current interest in SDE educational environments has its roots primarily in human nature, dating back to our evolutionary origins (Gray, 2016, 2023). Natural selection has laid the biological foundation for cognitive mechanisms to learn from information necessary for humans to adapt and be useful in social contexts (Rogoff, 2003; Lancy *et al.*, 2010; Bjorklund and Ellis, 2014).

Over the last few centuries, dominant educational systems have been created, determined by direct instruction, direct measurements, little autonomy, little exploration, little informal learning, hardly any mix of ages and based on reproduction of past tradition (Soysal and Strang, 1989; Meyer *et al.*, 1992; Van Horn Melton, 2002). These educational systems have been successful in their task to educate large populations in a historical time frame. Because most discourses, both in academia and beyond, build on the inherited practices of these educational systems, there is little to no knowledge base from which we can draw to understand the development of skills needed in our modern world from alternative educational contexts. This could be important especially now given the concerns that many countries around the world have regarding education, like a decline in school motivation and engagement and its effect on students' academic attainment (Tze *et al.*, 2016; Salmela-Aro, 2017), as well as in civic and citizenship skills (Schulz *et al.*, 2017; Pontes *et al.*, 2019) and in teacher job satisfaction (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018). Stress from school is one of the main factors for students' feelings of depression or burn-out, affecting motivation for school (e.g. USA, Finland, The Netherlands: Gray, 2013; Salmela-Aro, 2017; Schoemaker *et al.*, 2019). Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) is a rapidly emerging field that examines motivation and posits that three basic human needs – autonomy, competence and relatedness – are essential for well-being and self-determination. Unfortunately, in conventional schooling, the emphasis lies on short-term cognitive results and extrinsic control through punishments and rewards (e.g. stickers, gold stars and grades) which undermines self-determination (Deci *et al.*, 2001). These short-term goals make the overall and long-term development to live a full life (in German: Bildung) a deferred goal for the school-aged child.

Many countries are also concerned with the declining mental health and well-being of teens and college students, which could be related to a decline in time spent on independent and self-chosen activities (Gray *et al.*, 2023). According to these authors, young people today are generally less likely to build traits like creativity and initiative, a desire to learn, a willingness to take risks and emotional resilience than they were in decades past. Young people have less opportunity to create their own activities, solve their own problems and adaptively regulate their emotions than previous generations (Chudacoff, 2007; Epstein, 2007; Gray, 2011; Gray *et al.*, 2023).

We noticed that much research focuses on improving rather than reimagining the dominant model of education. Rather than looking at how these conventional systems can be changed, this special issue brings together evidence of educational spaces that rely on different approaches. We believe that societies benefit more from people who know how to learn, feel and act in harmony with themselves and their (social) environment. As Ryan and Lynch (2003)

note, schools should provide a context to facilitate human development as opposed to environments that attempt to deliver a standardized product.

Despite the many attempts of educational renewal, schools can only change if the entire education system changes. This requires more research into how humans become educated in alternative environments. Very little research has been done on educational spaces outside the conventional systems. Yet, contexts that draw on a different, more relational and holistic, paradigm could drive new futures for learning and possibilities for human development. One such context is SDE. SDE is based on evolutionary developmental psychology and views education from the perspective of how humans have learned throughout evolutionary history (Gray, 2023). As described by Gray, SDE environments offer free communication and interaction with people of all ages, the ability to experience the skills and knowledge that are considered important within the culture and the ability to play and experiment without limits with the instruments that are important to the culture. SDE spaces support the full human development of the person within an interrelated whole without the constraints of a pre-defined curriculum.

Thus, we posed the following questions: Specifically, how do SDE spaces allow for more relational and holistic ways of knowing, being and doing? Furthermore, what is the role of context, relatedness and self-direction in human development within an SDE space?

The contributions we have collected in this special issue describe different SDE contexts from varied perspectives with a focus on themes such as autonomy, agency, freedom of choice, self-management, ownership and participation. The articles are ordered from more theoretical, overarching points of view, to studies focused on specific contexts in K-12 education.

Contents of this special issue

The issue begins with a Guest Editorial by Peter Gray, arguably the foremost scholar in the field of SDE. Gray defines SDE, discusses its history and makes a projection about its future.

The first article is written by Tony DeCesare, Assistant Professor at the Department of Education at Saint Xavier University in Chicago, Illinois, the USA. His conceptual and theoretical contribution frames what we believe to be the following very important question based on the tension that exists between welfare and participatory rights within the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: what kind, and how much participation in compulsory education are children entitled to? Looking at this question through the lens of the capabilities approach (CA) (Nussbaum, 2011) provides a new perspective on a long-standing scientific discourse and illustrates how a more relational way of knowing, being and doing can be fostered. He discusses the traditional approach that CA and other theorists have taken towards children and compares this with the emerging literature within CA that emphasizes children's agency and autonomy. With this in mind, DeCesare considers what type of education best supports the development of children's participatory potential, arguing that SDE is well suited to the task of fostering children's participatory capacities. His conclusion is that we should therefore regard this type of education as an example of how children can exercise their rights. By applying the CA framework to SDE, this paper contributes to both capabilities theory and SDE scholarship by offering SDE scholars new theoretical tools and suggesting an educational approach in which these participative capacities are practiced.

The second article is by Renee Tougas, and forms part of her MA in Educational Studies, Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Through a narrative literature review, content analysis and autoethnographic reflection, Tougas critically examines the neoliberal subjectivity of SDE and identifies neoliberal-resistant SDE practices of Black homeschooling families. Along the lines of Wilson (2017), she points out the vulnerability of SDE to neoliberal ways of knowing, despite their anti-establishment discourse. By analyzing conceptions of self, autonomy and freedom (the ideas that underwrite self-direction), she explores contemporary Black homeschooling and SDE practices, arguing that this

demographic, at the margins of the discursive homeschooling community, instantiates an authentic resistance and disruption to neoliberal subjectivity in SDE. The vulnerability of SDE to neoliberalization is important to self-directed learning, homeschoolers, unschoolers and other SDE facilitators who want to practice alternative-to-mainstream values and social justice-oriented pedagogy toward a more democratic, inclusive future.

Thomas Noel, Ariel Sylvester and Joby (Joseph) Gardner from DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois, the USA, also examine Black homeschooling and SDE. Thomas and Joby are Assistant Professors from the Department of Leadership, Language and Curriculum and Ariel graduated from the Program in Early Childhood Education. Using a critical constructivist grounded theory methodology, they analyzed how Black homeschooling organizations based in the USA characterize their missions in public Web presence in 2023–2024. The authors asked what the mission statements reveal about the challenges Black parents face in many conventional schools and how they are working individually and collectively to reimagine educational ways of knowing, being and doing to counter anti-blackness and promote (Black) excellence, joy, love and community in and through education. Using Afrofuturism (Strait and Conwill, 2023) and fugitive pedagogy (Givens, 2021) as theoretical lenses, findings revealed that Black homeschooling organizations offer families a safe and informative community as they seek agency, autonomy and brighter futures for their children than may be accessible in conventional schools. In this paper, they argue that Black homeschooling represents a kind of fugitive teaching that can be usefully understood through the lens of Afrofuturism as a part of individual and collective efforts by Black people to exercise social and cultural agency in the face of anti-Blackness in schools and in society. Their research fills an empirical gap in the literature on Black homeschooling and SDE by connecting the emancipatory intentions of Black homeschoolers who may not explicitly mention SDE but share similar values.

A fourth article is written by Cammie Justus-Smith, research assistant at the Department for Foundations of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, USA and explores the experiences of 11 former teachers who transitioned into SDE. She based her study on Ivan Illich's (1971) *Deschooling Society*, using thematic analysis to analyze interviews of educators who have left conventional teaching for more holistic ways of knowing, being and doing. Their deschooling journey was marked not only by transitioning from acting as a primary director of learning to becoming a facilitator of students' autonomous educational trajectory but also by a fundamental rejection of conventional education's role as an important cultural cornerstone. By embracing the need for childhood autonomy and agency, participants reimaged their relationship with students as they emerged on the other side of the deschooling process. Justus-Smith's work describes the transformative potential of deschooling and demonstrates SDE's alignment with Illich's vision for a lifelong learning society that transcends institutional constraints. Her work illuminates a new educational landscape that contributes to the discourse on educational reform and the empowerment of authentic learner-directed education.

As a fifth contribution, we present the work by Kristan Morrison, an Associate Professor in Radford University's College of Education and Human Development, Virginia, USA. A content analysis was applied to 278 weekly School Meeting minutes from one democratic free school in Germany to analyze the ways in which student's voice was actualized in that school. This article uses Fielding's (2012) patterns of partnership typology to illustrate what counts as student voice and participation in this democratic free school. Her analysis focuses not only on student voices but also on the leadership role (equal or dominant) of the adults. This study can help people more deeply understand what goes on in democratic free schools and what student voice and participation can mean within this context. Like several of the articles in this issue, Morrison highlights relational ways of knowing, being and doing that foster democratic participation and demonstrate the potential of SDE to support democracies more broadly.

A sixth article is by Christel Hartkamp-Bakker and Rob Martens. Christel is a doctoral candidate and Rob is a full-time Professor at the Department of Conditions for Lifelong Learning, Open University, Heerlen, The Netherlands. This study examined true choice and taking ownership of life based on a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 14 adult participants from eight different democratic schools in The Netherlands, Israel and the USA. These schools were structured in accordance with the Sudbury model and offered students authentic choices in how they spent their time. Hartkamp-Bakker and Martens used self-determination theory (SDE: [Ryan and Deci, 2000](#)) to suggest that the schools' organizational structure supports the students' owning of responsibility in the absence of an imposed program. Participants identified the culture of no interference as one that creates conditions for taking ownership of life and choices (self-determination). Taking ownership of one's life seems to be related to strongly internally oriented processes with an internal *locus* of causality, as demonstrated by participants describing how they found their own motivation and took responsibility for choices, behavior and consequences in a need-supportive social context. The relational environment of Sudbury model schools seems to foster long-term self-determination of one's life suggests that these spaces provide a more holistic way to prepare students for their future as autonomous individuals in democratic societies.

The issue concludes with a book review of Susan Blum's (2024) book *Schoolishness: Alienated Education and the Quest for Authentic, Joyful Learning* by Melissa Riley Bradford, a professor of educational leadership at DePaul University. According to Melissa, this book, although not dealing with a new subject, is thought-provoking and very readable for a broader public. What is new is that it is written from an anthropological perspective, based on personal experience and supported by science. Blum focuses primarily on less schoolish structures and what that can mean for the enjoyment of learning. The book did not intend to describe SDE practices, but they are mentioned a number of times. Because the book is partly a personal story of the author as a post-secondary teacher in a search for less schoolishness, it is in our opinion a valuable contribution to this special issue. The review takes the reader through the three different parts of the book and its contents. The review ends with some points of critique and recommendations for reading.

Conclusion

The in-depth exploration of SDE within this issue explores many different aspects of SDE context. To view the rights of the child in a different perspective from Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2011) may teach us more about children as full human beings who, as participative members of democracy, can develop more holistically, effectively expressing their autonomy, agency and ownership of their own lives within a relational context. Articles stress the potential of SDE in civic and democratic citizenship skills development and stress how children's capabilities to make informed decisions should be taken more seriously. We learn from Black homeschoolers about the potential to prevent neoliberal individualized pedagogy and anti-blackness. These articles show us the universal, deep-rooted human nature to strive for excellence, joy, love, liberation and community in and through education, but not necessarily through schooling. We learn from the teacher-student, nonauthoritarian relationship that it involves a deschooling journey for formally trained teachers to be effective in these SDE contexts, but also how certain authoritarian relationships seem to manifest themselves in decision-making bodies in one such context. Experiences with free choice in an SDE space without an imposed program teach us the deeper meaning of autonomy and relatedness in support of becoming the protagonist of one's life.

SDE may be an idea whose time has come, or maybe it is just going to be one alternative among many, but we believe that it can inform and help direct change for the future of democracy more broadly, given the crises we face today.

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