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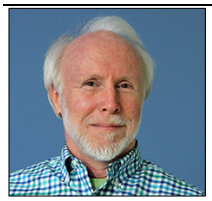
Freedom, dialogue, and education in a democratic school



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Abstract
This article is based on two interviews between Jim Rietmulder, the founder and lead staff at The Circle School (in Harrisburg, PA), and Ana Marjanovic-Shane, an Independent Scholar and a Co-Editor of this Special Issue. We discuss and examine the daily practice and the philosophical approach of a particular democratic school as we discuss democratic education in general. The main purpose of these interviews has been to introduce democratic education and explore the place for dialogic pedagogy in a democratic school, where the students are free to choose what to study, when to study, in what ways they want to study, with whom they want to study, etc. What happens to dialogic pedagogy if the students are not engaged around the same topics together? The question is whether the students' legitimate status of free persons with equal rights of opinion and decision-making also creates opportunities and conditions for the students to engage in the critical dialogic examinations of the world, of their life and learning, and of their desires, motivations, and values.

Jim Rietmulder is a founder (1984) and current staff member at The Circle School, a pioneering democratic school in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and the author of *When Kids Rule the School: The Power and Promise of Democratic Education*. At The Circle School, students practice freedom and responsibility in a scaled-down version of the larger world, becoming experts at life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Among other things, Jim tutors students to take college entrance exams, plays mixed-age soccer at every opportunity, and anchors a daily Critical Thinking Discussion Group. Prior to, and overlapping with, The Circle School's early years, Jim was a history magazine editor, software developer, and management consultant.

Ana Marjanovic-Shane is an Independent Scholar interested in ethical ontological dialogism and meaning-making in education, democratic education, students' academic freedoms, and students' critical and creative authorship in self-education. Her articles in English and Serbian were published in various journals (e.g., *Mind, Culture, Activity Journal*, *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction, Dialogic Pedagogy Journal*) and as book chapters in books on play and education. Two recent publications include: Shugurova, O., Matusov, E., & Marjanovic-Shane, A. (2022). The University of Students: A place for joint self-education. *Dialogic Pedagogy: An International Online Journal, 10*, E1-E42; Marjanovic-Shane, A., Meacham, S., Choi, H. J., Lopez, S., & Matusov, E. (2019). Idea-dying in critical ontological pedagogical dialogue. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction, 20*, 68-79, and a book: Matusov, E., A. Marjanovic-Shane & M. Gradovski, (2019). *Dialogic pedagogy and polyphonic research art: Bakhtin by and for educators*, Palgrave Macmillan. Ana lives and works in the USA.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to introduce and examine democratic education as a philosophical approach and a daily practice. The article is based on two interviews between Jim Rietmulder, a founder and leading staff member at The Circle School in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and Ana Marjanovic-Shane, an Independent Scholar of dialogic and democratic education[1]. The main goal of these interviews has been to explore what is the place for dialogic pedagogy in a democratic school, where the students are free to choose to study whatever they want, when they want it, in what ways they want to learn it, with whom they want to study, etc. What happens to dialogic pedagogy if the students are not engaged around the same topics together? The question is whether the students' legitimate status of free persons with equal rights of opinion and decision-making also creates opportunities and conditions for dialogues, and what kinds of dialogues? Are there opportunities for the students and staff to engage in critical, dialogic examinations of the world, of their life and learning, and of their desires, motivations, and values?

The interviews took place in the summer and fall of 2019. We examine the students' educational freedoms, their participation in the democratic governance of their school, the meaning of democratic education, and, crucially, the role of dialogue in the everyday practices of The Circle School.

We start with a brief history of The Circle School. After that, we recursively discuss the meaning of the concepts of democracy, freedom, sovereignty, self-education, and philosophical and educational pluralism. In our discussion of self-education, we compare and contrast democratic and progressive schools as we explore the difference between the democratic school focus on educational ecology and the conventional/progressive schools' focus on educational instruction. We discuss pluralism as an ideological approach and its relevance to the change in the educational focus from instruction to ecology. In our exploration of the place of dialogue in this democratic school, we examine contexts, practices, and events in which dialogues of different kinds take place in The Circle School, and we scrutinize the meaning of "dialogue" and of "pedagogy" within these contexts. At the end of the interview, we talk about the educational model of the scaled-down democracy and building a culture of democratic schooling as the possible support for the future of civic democracy.

History of how The Circle School became democratic

Ana: I think it would be good to start our interview with your first philosophy of education [in 1984]. What you wanted to do when you were starting The Circle School in 1984, and how your thoughts evolved today.

Jim: Well, life experience and having children affirmed our[2] belief that everyone is born with an impulse to strive, thrive, and grow. So our hope was (and still is) to tap that impulse to drive education and development, to replace the top-down coercion of conventional schooling and its one-size-fits-all curriculum and methodology. Over time, self-determination is better than an imposed standard program – better education and, more importantly, more conducive to personal fulfillment and constructive engagement in the world. In the early years, we didn't fully connect that belief to collective self-determination – democracy. But it really is connected – the idea that each individual has a perspective that can contribute to collective direction and societal fulfillment. So we came to believe that fulfilled

[1] Jim and Ana met in 2003, through their involvement in an ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) civil lawsuit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania law requiring every student to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the US flag at the start of each school day. At that time, Jim was leading The Circle School in Harrisburg, PA, that joined this lawsuit, and Ana was a leading parent at the Project Learn School in Philadelphia, PA, which also joined this lawsuit. Later, in 2011, Ana introduced Jim and The Circle School to a group of scholars she belonged to, interested in Dialogic Pedagogy and Democratic Education. Since then, Jim and The Circle School have collaborated in many ways with this group of scholars. A leading member of this group of scholars has been Eugene Matusov, whose comments and questions are included in this article.
[2] Jim and Beth L. Stone, his wife, were co-founders of The Circle School.

individuals tend to lead to fulfilled society, and also that society's role in individual development is crucial. And so, where the state, the society, has an interest in developing its citizens, there's no conflict between personal development and societal development. Fulfilled individuals lead to elevated society.

> <<**Eugene (Matusov), 2021-12-24:** I disagree with his rosy statement. 😊 Society may need people acting like smart machines, which is not necessarily good for personal fulfillment.
>
> **Jim**, **2022-01-04**: Eugene seems to suggest that society, facing a labor shortage of "people acting like smart machines," would be better off by impeding development of (at least some) individuals. Can that possibly be true? It seems to me that maximizing each person's capacity – fulfillment of personal potential – also maximizes society's capacity to meet its challenges.
>
> In addition, "people acting like smart machines" may (as Eugene says) "not necessarily be good for personal fulfillment." But it might well be good for some individuals' development at some stages of development. That is, I see no basis for assuming a conflict between maximizing individual fulfillment and "people acting like smart machines.">>

Jim: The idea behind democratic schooling is that it's not about exaggerated freedom for children, it's not about emphasizing individual rights over community rights, or community rights over individual rights. In my view, if you emphasize either extreme of that polarity, then you've got a libertarian or socialist school. Democratic education only works as "agency in community." We don't want to raise kids in the wild, apart from community and society.

> <<**Eugene, 2021-12-24**: Yes, but this is not the same as claiming no tensions between the society and the 'lichnost.' [A Slavic concept of a "person"]
>
> **Jim, 2022-01-04**: I don't know what "lichnost" means. There are always tensions between the individual and society. I'm surely not claiming no tensions there. I'd guess those tensions surface one way or another at nearly every session of School Meeting!>>

Ana: When and how and why did you start defining The Circle School [TCS] as a democratic school?

Jim: When we [the founders of TCS] visited Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts. At the end of our three-day visit, our conclusion was that they were implementing our philosophy better than we were. That was eight years into The Circle School, seven or eight years into it. During those first few years, we had made one concession after another to parents and families that took us further from what we originally wanted to do.

Ana: What kinds of concessions?

Jim: Well, we imposed studies of some subjects and more reporting to parents about their children than we wanted to do. And there was more focus on traditional academics, and less focus on playing outdoors. By the late 1980s, just four years or so into the existence of our school, we were pretty clear that this was not the direction we wanted it to go in, that we weren't satisfying our own intentions for the school's philosophy. Then we saw an example of democratic schooling at the Sudbury Valley School that was persuasive. We were very much aware of the Summerhill model. Summerhill was a very influential source of inspiration and information for us, long before we opened The Circle School. And we were aware that we were drifting further away from what Summerhill was doing. And so, the combination of Summerhill and our visit to Sudbury Valley School was not only a wake-up call, it also gave us direction. It was a galvanizing experience.

Ana: And you were primarily unhappy because there were more and more impositions on children or students?

Jim: Yes. It was clear that children were not resonating with what we were doing in a way that would let us know that we were on track. In our philosophy we said, “Let's follow each child's lead and support them in their own development, in their own way, in their own time.” But we were doing less and less of that.

And the feedback we were getting from kids didn't feel like what we would expect (see more in Matusov, 2021). We believed in the wisdom of each person to know what's best for him or her. That was the philosophy we began with, and yet we were not doing that to the degree that we wanted to. And I think we did not anticipate that parents would push us in another direction. But that was a lesson we learned early and often – that there is a tension among parents’ diverse duties. Parents' duties are to keep their kids safe. Their top three duties and top three concerns are safety, safety, and safety. But that works against another parental duty, which is to help your children become independent of you, the parents. And so, knowing when to let go and when to rein in is a perennial challenge for parents, and parents naturally tend toward the side of keeping their children close to them.

And yet that's not healthy for development; it's healthy to have good, solid, secure intimacy at home and also healthy for kids to have plenty of experience out in the world. And the school's job, as we saw it then and still do now, is to help with that latter piece, giving kids experience being apart from home and family. And so, in one sense, you could say that the feedback we were getting from kids was that separation wasn't big enough. And the feedback from parents, that separation was too big. Or more precisely, not too big, but they wanted more control over their children’s education and life in school. So that was the dissatisfaction that we experienced in the first four or five years, and it took us eight years in before we were able to do something about it.

Ana: That’s when you visited Sudbury Valley School?

Jim: Yes. And then we said, "Okay, we gotta move in this direction." And so, then we began a process with our families in our school community. We tried to bring along as many people as we could.

At about the same time we adopted a more democratic program, over two school years, we also relocated our school from a rural and geographically remote village to the city of Harrisburg about 20 minutes away[3]. And in the process, we lost quite a few families. It's hard to say how many we lost for philosophical reasons and how many for geographical reasons. But we also gained a huge number of other families. And what we learned in that process was that if you grow too fast, that's not good. Because, especially with a democratic philosophy of education, so different from the conventional educational philosophy, it takes families, especially parents, a couple of years to become familiar with it and comfortable with it.

Ana: It is interesting that they send their children to such a school when they're still not feeling very comfortable with it.

Jim: Well, some families sent their children because of the intuition that this is the right thing, even though it's pushing their limits a little bit. And for other families, those who came to us in crisis, they've got a child who's alienated from school or otherwise unhappy. And then there are some who come because the school is geographically convenient, or for other very practical or logistical reasons. But still, we grew rapidly, and then fell back. We didn't retain newcomers as well as the old-timers, as people who had already been with the school or who understood the philosophy of democratic education.

[3] Harrisburg, the capital of Pennsylvania, is a political and economic center, an urban community close to the predominantly rural environment in which TCS started, yet demographically, economically, politically and ideologically very different from the rural environment.

A democratic school is a working democracy

Ana: So, what did it actually mean when you first changed to be democratic? What is democratic education? What is democratic education philosophy?

Jim: It's hard to say it better than what I wrote in my recent book, "In self-directed democratic schools, kids practice life in a microcosm of society, empowered as voters, bound by laws, challenged by choice, supported by community, and driven by nature" (Rietmulder, 2019, p. 1). So, a democratic school is a working democracy. The school is a working democracy in itself, where the governed get to make the rules and decide policies that have to do with the general welfare. "A democratic school operates as a free society and democracy of staff members and students embracing student civil liberties, rule of law, due process, one person one vote, and absence of mandatory curriculum" (reading from his recent book, Rietmulder, 2019, p. 10). So, in a democratic school, in our meaning, students and staff together manage legislative, judicial, and executive functions of the school in sort of a scaled-down version of American governments (federal, state, and local).

In its legislative function, the School Meeting adopts laws. Our law book has over 200 laws in it at this point[4]. Laws are carried forward from one year to the next. Every one of those laws was adopted by majority vote of students and school staff. And of course, staff are greatly outnumbered by students, so it's clear that students hold significant authority in governing the school. Most votes at weekly and special School Meetings, including on legislative issues, are not highly contested. That is, the debate continues from week to week, and sometimes from month to month, until there's a pretty good consensus. We only require a majority vote to adopt something. But as in most small groups of people, most people want to hear all points of view and want to continue the dialogue until people are generally satisfied that they have been heard, whether or not they've been able to persuade the group. So, most of the laws in the law book have gotten far more than a majority to get in there. And of course, all of the laws in our law book could be repealed or amended any week. And every week, the School Meeting, that's staff and students, is debating new rules, amendments to old ones, and repeals. Even after 35 years, not a week goes by without School Meeting considering, oh, I would say on average, half a dozen rules are in play.

Ana: So, what kind of laws, for instance?

Jim: Well, let me ask that as a question for you now, Ana. If you were coming to a community gathering every day, a place where for roughly 6-8 hours a day, you're gonna share the space with many other people, what are some rules that you think we should have?

Ana: Okay. There would be, first of all, organization of the space, I guess, like who can go where, at what time, if there is any reason to believe that there [may be] some conflicts in the space. More importantly, probably about the rights of what you can do. Like what's [allowed] to do, and what's not [allowed] to do? What can you do? For instance, since I know a little bit about your school, can you run, or not run? Or, let's say, from my own experience as a 10-year-old child [in a summer camp], can you go to swim on a particular beach or at a particular time of day?

Jim: We have rules along those lines. Certainly, we have rules about how certain space is used, many rules about keeping order, many rules about safety.

Most of our rules are worded in the negative in order to maximize freedom. So, if you tell somebody what they can do and they can only do what they're told they can do, they have less freedom... than if you tell them, "You can do everything except the things that you're told you can't do."

[4] The interview took place on July 15th, 2019

Ana: You know that there was a philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, who talked about positive and negative freedom (Berlin, 2006), and said exactly that. A positive freedom is the "freedom for," specifying that you can do something, and negative freedom is "freedom from," where you can do anything except what is forbidden.

Jim: Yeah, yeah. And I think we favor the negative version to maximize freedom. There is also an organizational theory of governance called Policy Governance associated with John Carver (Carver & Carver, 1996), that advocates governing all organizations, basically, with policies that are worded in the negative so that management or whoever is implementing operations has maximum freedom to achieve desired ends by any [legitimate] means. So, we have rules. We have a rule that says, "No running indoors." We have a rule against "hostile, physical aggression." A rule against "verbal assault." A rule against stealing. A rule against damaging property or using people's property without permission. We have rules about where it's okay to eat, and where it's not. Our eating rule basically says, "We can eat over one of the epoxy floors, but we can't eat in a room that has carpet."

One of the most commonly violated rules, maybe the most commonly violated, is a rule that says, "Clean up your own messes." If you make a mess... you've got to clean it up, you can't leave a mess, right. And we have a rule that requires everyone to do a daily housekeeping chore, a number of civic duties, and that would be one of them. You gotta do a daily housekeeping chore.

Some of our rules are common sense, and then some of them are not; they're things that you wouldn't think of. So, for example, we have a rule that says, "If you make a paper airplane, you must write your name on it before you fly it." And the reason for this... All of our rules have come out of experience and need, but that particular...

Ana: 'Cause people don't take responsibility, they throw an airplane, hit somebody, and you're just like...??

Jim: Well, or not so much that it hits somebody. But paper airplanes tend to go in waves. So, someone makes a paper airplane and it's likely that 10 other people make paper airplanes, and they're all flying their paper airplanes, and then at the end of the day, there're a bunch of paper airplanes lying about, and oddly enough, they don't belong to anybody and nobody is responsible for them. [chuckle] And so, to solve that problem, School Meeting said, "You gotta write your name on it first." A similar rule was made after many trick-or-treat nights. We have a rule that says that for one week after Halloween trick-or-treat night, before you unwrap candy, you have to write your name on the outside of the wrapper. [chuckle] Only for one week, but that solved the litter problem.

Ana: Yes. Okay, so there are many, many rules and regulations and they are constantly being debated and kept or not kept. What else is a characteristic of a democratic school besides rules and regulations?

"Corporations"

Jim: People are pursuing their own interests, and that can be one person alone, or it can be a small group. It can be formal or informal. As an example of a formal structure, we have groups called "Corporations." At some point in the past, these groups have been given responsibility for either some space in the school or certain kinds of activities or materials and equipment. And so, we have an Art Corporation, a Music Corporation, Science Corporation. We used to have a Sewing Corporation, we have a Gardening Corporation, Cooking Corporation…

Ana: Why are they called "corporations" and not "committees," let's say?

Jim: That's a tradition we picked up from Sudbury Valley School, the word "corporation." But there's a very clear distinction at The Circle School between corporations and committees, and this distinction doesn't necessarily apply to other democratic schools. I've heard schools' various definitions, distinctions. But our distinction is that a committee is an agency of school government. School Meeting appoints

committees. So, we have a library committee, an aesthetics committee, office committee, PR committee, fundraising committee, social committee. The committees act with the authority of School Meeting within their domain.

A corporation is something different. A corporation is a semi-private organization; it has its own bylaws, its own officers, it makes its own decisions. It organizes the way it wants; it fundraises [for financing their own projects]. Corporations have their own bank accounts with the school. So, they make their own decisions, and they enter into a deal with School Meeting; in effect, the corporation charter gives them authority to govern some aspect of the school and in return, they make their domain available to everybody in the school.

The Art Corporation, long ago, was given authority over the art room. And so, they get to decide what materials will be there, the rules for using the materials, they train people to use the materials, the finger paints, the tempera paints, the sculpting tools, and so on. They train people and certify them for various skills and materials and equipment. Anybody can apply. The person, in order to become certified, has to learn the rules or demonstrate the competence necessary to use whatever it is they're applying to use. But once certified, then a person can go use that equipment, that space, or those materials, any time they want to, assuming it's available.

And so, democratic schools have dozens or hundreds of what I think of as self-service systems. It's a self-service system, because you serve yourself. If you and your buddies wanna go and do finger painting, four-, five-, six-year-olds, for example, you can just go and serve yourself. Ordinarily, or in other schools, they might be able to do that only when that activity is scheduled. At The Circle School, they can get together or as a single individual, they can go into the art room as long as they've been certified for it. They can get out the materials, do their painting project, do the clean-up, put things away. Someone who's certified by the Science Corporation can use one of the microscopes, pull it down off the shelf, use it for whatever they want to, and then put it away. There's help available for all of those, but you don't have to get help. And so, the corporations are an important part of the school.

> <<**Eugene, 2021-12-24**: Why does it need to be certification? Why can't it be covered by a general rule to clean after yourself?
>
> **Jim, 2022-01-04**: Because it's not obvious how to clean the microscope slides, avoid damaging the equipment, and put stuff away. A general rule doesn't do it. Also, certs happen BEFORE use of the equipment – thus maybe preventing damage – but rules only kick in AFTER it's too late to protect the equipment.>>

Ana: So, the corporations organize activities or rule over certain types of activities. That's how I understand, I'm trying to conceptualize it. I really never thought deeper about that. I just thought of them as committees, but now I can see that it's something completely different, really.

Jim: Yeah. So, if you go into the music studio, you have to follow the Music Corporation's rules. You can't use the recording booth or the sound engineering equipment unless and until you've been trained and demonstrated that you know how to use it properly. You can't touch the guitars or the keyboards until you've been trained or demonstrated your ability to use them properly. But once you have, you're free to use them any time.

Ana: So how do you know whether somebody's certified or not? Is there any kind of physical badge they get, or something? Or it's such a small community, then everybody knows?

Jim: Well, no, I don't know who's certified for what. And I wouldn't generally need to, but each of the corporations keeps a list, most of them will post the list right on the wall so that if you wanna make sure you're certified for something, you can go check, or if you wanna find out if a certain person is certified, you can go check. The corporation membership is voluntary but open to anybody. The corporation

members who are the ones administering the space or the activity or the equipment are probably much more aware than others of who is certified. But the enforcement, it's basically an honor system. If you aren't certified to use a piece of equipment and you're using it, somebody might notice but maybe nobody would notice. I think it would get noticed. So, yeah, if I needed to know if somebody was certified, I could go look at the list, but I'm not thinking of a time when I needed to do that.

Ana: So basically, this is in place to enable people to have self-determined learning.

Jim: No, it's self-determined *activity* – with or without "learning." There's no expectation that people intend to "learn" when they engage these self-service systems. They might do it for "fun" or to "be with friends." They might or might not "learn" something from it that standards educators would identify or value. Most kids most days don't come to The Circle School with an idea to "learn" something, but more often come to school with an idea to "do" something. Sadly, the word "learn" has come to be overly associated with traditional academic subjects and instructional materials. I'd argue that all "doing" results in learning (without quotes), but even so, I feel a need here to call out the word "learning" if only to disavow that K-12 schooling is justified by a need for curricular learning. I think K-12 schooling is properly about kids' personal fulfillment and engagement in the world. That's a lot bigger than "learning."

The ability to do something on your own without asking permission, without getting an adult to help, is a big deal in the life of a young child. It builds a sense of self-efficacy, it builds introspective skills, it builds intelligence, general intelligence. It's more demanding cognitively than when something is scheduled for you and now a teacher comes and tells you what to do and has you do it. It requires that you be aware of context in a way that isn't necessary if someone, if an adult is directing your activity. Anyway, yeah, there's huge empowerment for young kids in self-service systems and also a huge stimulation of growth.

Ana: What if somebody… Did you have such a situation? If somebody constantly wants to be guided and have help and not do anything wrong?

Jim: Oh, that's an interesting question.

Ana: Did you ever have any such situation, that they're constantly asking for help?

Jim: There are certainly kids who have come to us from adult-directed programs who will go through a transition period. I don't know if we've ever had a young child who came to us at, say, four years old in that mode. Although some are very timid. But that's different than asking for, requiring, adult direction for everything. There are plenty of kids who will rely on their friends to provide leadership. But that's different, too. But yes, certainly, there are kids who have asked for more help than they need. They could be asking friends, or they could be asking older or more capable students, or they could be asking us adult staff members. If I detect that pattern, if a student comes to me and asks for help more than they need, then I'm probably going to still give them help. But also, for me personally, I would want to be pointing out to them that they don't need my help. And I would be holding back, knowing that they are capable, if I think they're capable. If they're not, then of course, I'm gonna help. But it's a rare human being who doesn't wanna be autonomous.

Democratic schools vs. progressive schools

Ana: Right. So, I saw this belief in your book. The belief that every one of us has possibilities to be self-sustainable, interested and able to find resources. If you're not stopped in that growth and that development, it is like a force that leads us. So, from the point of view of the traditional and many other modern schools like Montessori, or Reggio Emilia, Waldorf, or other progressive schools, it seems that you see democratic school like a step up or a new stage in development of schooling?

Jim: Yes. I think of democratic schools as being alone in a new emerging category of schools. The schools you named, yes, I would call them all modern. And I'm lumping postmodern or progressive into that category as well, because I don't see a sharper distinction between them…

Ana: I would like to know more about what you call postmodern schools?

Jim: I think postmodern schools are just modern schools that are staffed with people who have values that might be classified as postmodern. The structure of a postmodern or a progressive school, I think is identical to the structure of modern schools, which is to say that it's hierarchical, with students at the bottom and administrators at the top and a curriculum that's imposed on students and teachers, and sometimes administration as well. That's imposed from some external source, and students have no choice but to go along with it.

The categorical difference that places democratic schools in a category by itself – different from the traditional and from the modern schools – is that democratic schools have an entirely different structure. Instead of the teachers and administration governing the school, it is the School Meeting governing the school. And School Meeting is made up of students, staff, and administrators.

And I think that democratic schools are also in a category apart because all of the previous forms, all of the previous teaching methods and ways of learning, the modes of learning – traditional, modern, progressive, postmodern – are available in democratic schools. So, a student in a democratic school could follow a strict curriculum if they wanted to. They could do entirely independent study if they wanted to. They could abandon formal curriculum and teaching materials, learning materials, altogether if they want to. So, the democratic school is more like a venue able to host any learning mode or mechanism, which is not true in modern schools and even progressive schools. In the modern and progressive schools, what you're gonna learn, the subject matter, is dictated by a preset curriculum and the preset methodology of instruction. The curriculum and instruction are dictated by the philosophy of the teacher or the school. But students don't get to choose either the curriculum or method. In contrast, in democratic schools, both the curriculum and the methodology of instruction are open for students to determine for themselves. So, the factor of self-determination is what distinguishes democratic schools.

Ana: Right. But I think it is a category in itself. I would say even more than just a category in itself, although you say there are methods from all of different types of schooling. Still, democratic school is a venue where the students can choose. I would say that, what probably gives different meaning to everything else, is the different philosophy. And that is the philosophy of self-determination.

Jim: That's it. It's a good point. What the democratic school accommodates from traditional education are the techniques that were characteristic of traditional education, such as rote memorization, drill and practice. But what the democratic school can't and would not replicate from a traditional school is the authoritarianism. From modern education, democratic schools inherit, for example, the method of “guided discovery” – lesson plans intended to lead students to prescribed insights. You're right that in democratic schools, students retain choice.

Education in a scaled-down democracy as a pathway to a civil society

Ana: Tell me more about the idea that your school is a scaled-down society or a scaled-down democracy. What shapes this scale-down? Obviously, the school is not the American society. In scaling down American democracy, you shape it in a certain way. Like certain things that are possible in the society, are not possible in the school. In other words, what makes this scaled-down democracy – education?

Jim: There are certainly legal differences. The school satisfies the state's compulsory school laws. I'm not sure what other shaping influences are relevant. The scale is one. In the world beyond school, the scale is larger, and anonymity is a piece of it. The Circle School and all the democratic schools I know, and

maybe all schools at the primary and secondary level, are much smaller than the general society, which means that there isn't really a degree of anonymity. And certainly, at The Circle School, nobody's anonymous, everybody knows everybody to some degree, and I'm sure that's a shaping influence.

One of the shaping influences, of course, is the commitment to self-determination, individual self-determination, and collective self-determination. And so that certainly shapes things.

And part of The Circle School is an element of responsibility that is probably greater than the comparable element of responsibility in the world at large. So here, for example, our laws around aggression and bullying are such that in effect, there is no such thing as a bystander. In the world at large, if you see something significantly wrong, if you see aggression, hostility, violence, or if you see damage to property, you can walk away, and you won't be held legally responsible. That's not true at The Circle School. At The Circle School, if you fail to intervene in ways that are reasonable given your own abilities, then you may be breaking a rule that neglect is not allowed. So that's a shaping influence that has to do partly with scale.

Another big shaping influence would be that we're dealing with minors. We're dealing with kids from four-and-a-half-years-old right on up. So that's very different than in the world at large. It affects things about safety, regulation of safety. We have, as a school and as individual adult staff members, we have both a different moral duty and also a different legal duty to children. So that's a shaping influence.

Well, one thought is that a shaping influence is that we're dealing with immature human beings and therefore we might expect that our policy-making and our judicial actions are less sophisticated or are somehow inferior to those that are made in the world beyond school, but I don't think that's true, actually. [chuckle]

Ana: Okay, that's a very interesting question that you probably get from other people who are not involved in democratic schooling. How can children, four-year-olds, and let's say up to maybe 13-14, be given a right to make decisions for the school? Like what's good, what's bad, to participate in making laws, wouldn't they make laws that are somehow immature laws? [chuckle].

Jim: Our legislative processes and our judicial processes are certainly flawed and imperfect, and they're probably only a little bit better than those same processes in the world at large.

Ana: Why do you think they're better?

Jim: Well, I think that our legislative process is highly functional, and I just can't say that about state and federal legislative processes these days. I think part of democracy is peaceful co-existence of difference. I think that democratic schools generally, and I know that The Circle School in particular, as a community, is able to work through differences in a civil way, and there's very little vilification of people who hold different opinions. I think that one of the reasons, one of the roots of our current national dysfunction in government, and one of the roots of the incredibly antagonistic divisions politically, is the way we have publicly educated children for several generations now. We train children how to get by in what is essentially a totalitarian regime, or at least an authoritarian regime. For 12 years, we tell them to sit down, shut up, and do what you're told. Why on earth would we think that that's going to lead to good citizens in a democracy? Why on earth would we think that that's gonna lead to people who are good at collaboration and good at negotiating with people who have vastly differing opinions?

And so, I think one of the things that democratic schools represent is a pathway to a civil society. It is... To me, it's very strange that we have fashioned our public schools in a way that is so contrary to national ideals. And if we want people... If we want a functional government at the national and state levels, then our schools ought to be immersing kids in functional government at the school level.

Ana: That's true. But on the other hand, democratic schools are so scarce in the world. And there have been democratic societies that functioned as democratic much longer. And then, American democracy, no matter of its ups and downs, still exists with very autocratic schools. For several centuries.

Jim: The fact that the country has gotten by without democratic schools is not an argument in favor of the kinds of schools that we do have. It's just an observation…

Sovereignty, Freedom, and Democracy

Ana: What is the difference between freedom and democracy? In my research of the Scandinavian democratic high schools, I find that they sometimes had a problem in defining and distinguishing between "freedom" and "democracy." I think that that's very important to know, what is freedom in democratic schools? And what's the shape of that freedom?

Jim: Well, I think it's comparable to the freedom that we have in our democratic nation, and I guess here, we ought to note that when we use the word "democracy," we're not talking about "majority rules"; we're talking... Technically, we're talking about a constitutional democracy where the majority is limited in what it can impose on the minority. It almost always comes down to a balance between individual and society.

Ana: How much sovereignty students have as individuals or as corporations. So, it's kind of like... It's almost like finding out, as you say, where is the boundary of somebody's freedom.

Jim: Yeah. And I think that's always in flux. I think that there's no crisp way of drawing a line between individual and society, between sovereignty and dictates from the community. And I think maybe one of the essential elements that democratic schools teach, and mass education does not, is that life in a constitutional democracy, or in any society, is a constant balancing of individual self-determination with collective self-determination. That there is no black and white; things change every day and no two people are alike.

Focus on ecology vs. focus on instruction

Ana: What I was intrigued with in your book (Rietmulder, 2019), is the big difference that exists between all other kinds of schools that we know, on one hand, and democratic schools, on the other, regarding the focus that you have on the whole environment, the ecology of life and education on the level of the whole school, as opposed to the mainstream schools' organizing education on the level of classroom, or on the level of instruction. So, can you talk more about that? I never heard of that before.

Jim: I think we're saying that in conventional education, there's this sense that it has to be driven from above, that it has to be imposed. Somebody has to design how children are going to learn and grow. In contrast, we're starting from the premise that every child is born with an impulse to strive, thrive, and grow, and that impulse is what can more effectively drive education. It doesn't need to be driven externally, because the force that drives it is internal. So we don't need to design a particular curriculum program, and we certainly can't design one that is going to fit for everybody. We can't design one externally for anybody. I mean, who knows how a person is gonna change over time? So the idea of an imposed curriculum, we just reject outright. It's not... It's neither effective nor grounded.

Ana: But on the other hand, this idea is a little bit in contradiction with the idea that there always is a balance between the school and the society on the large scale. For instance, here we have the SATs[5] and college waiting somewhere. In a way, that is pushing people, some people, at some point of time, to go in a certain way, not in any other way. This fact penetrates the school environment.

Jim: Well… There are lots of impositions on kids in democratic schools.

[5] A nation-wide Scholastic Aptitude Test – required by many USA universities as a condition for acceptance.

Ana: I think this is important to talk about – just from the point of view of somebody who doesn't know. So, what are the impositions?

Jim: Well, the four-year-old walks in the front door on the first day of school and they're required to find their name on the sign-in board and write down the time that they arrived. They're required to sign up for a chore. If they can't find their name, they're gonna have to ask for help. If they can't tell time, they're gonna have to ask for help, but they're still required to do it. That's imposed. I think one of the differences is you can think of impositions in at least two categories: One is impositions because somebody thinks it's good for you, and impositions because the community or society that you're living in requires it of everybody or in certain circumstances, not because it's good for you, but because we need it to keep order in some way. And that's the sign-in board. We've decided as a community that that's the way we're gonna satisfy some state requirements imposed on the school. And so, that imposition is being passed down in that form.

We have decided that everybody has to do a daily housekeeping chore because we've, in effect, we've decided that that is superior to raising tuition and hiring a janitorial service. But that's an imposition that the school community is imposing on each of its members. And there are hundreds of such impositions. You can't eat your lunch over a carpeted floor. That's an imposition, even though you want to, and it might be the most convenient arrangement. So, there are many, many impositions…

Ana: It's just the way of living in this community…

Jim: Yes. Yes, and so, it's a balance that is struck between individual sovereignty and community needs. But there is no... There's no way to do that in a way that is absolute or crisp. If you have 10 different democratic schools, they're probably gonna come up with 10 different solutions for how to keep the school clean… And some don't have any chore system at all, they do hire a janitorial service. So yeah, many different solutions. And the solutions change over time, too.

And the influential individuals change. So, when one person graduates and new leadership develops in the chore committee, that may bring about changes in how chores work here. Yeah, there's no permanent or absolute solution.

Ana: Okay, so those are kind of life impositions. But what about actual, real educational impositions?

Jim: Well, let's go back to the life impositions. There is an important piece to that, too. Anybody who is aggrieved by those impositions can have their grievances addressed by the community. Anybody has the right to go propose a change in a particular imposition or to create a new imposition. And so, I think that's an important difference, too, between democratic schools and other institutions. Every institution, organization imposes something on its members, but in traditional and modern schools, the students who are subject to those impositions don't have much say, if any say at all. I think having a say makes a big difference, morally, practically and psychologically. And it makes a difference in education. I think educating somebody to be empowered over their own lives, over their own life, is a valuable thing. And when the system teaches people that they cannot change things, important things in their life, that's not a good thing for society. So, that's an important difference in the impositions: Are they negotiable…

Ana: That's very important because as soon as they are negotiable, you become a co-owner of them.

Jim: And that, I think, is exactly the sense in which democratic schools or democratic communities of all kinds are *intentional communities*. Unless you're born into it, when you come to The Circle School, you're entering into a form of a social contract. You are intentionally coming into a community in which you know what those impositions are. And in a sense, you're agreeing to abide by those. In fact, it's an explicit agreement for kids at The Circle School, at least the older kids. We have that conversation with them before they enroll, "Are you willing to take on these duties as they exist today? Are you willing to

abide by the self-determination of the community even if you disagree with the impositions that the community agrees on?"

Jim: Coming back to your question of "instruction" and the "balance between the school and the society on the large scale" … By driving education internally rather than externally, self-directed democratic schooling avoids the problem of kids becoming dependent on that external teacher/leader and instead sets kids up to be highly self-aware and world-aware and truly "lifelong learners." From an early age, typically without prompting, kids seek out the instruction they want and need, and their learning is more meaningful and enduring. As they get older, they see those large-scale societal impositions, such as the SATs you mentioned, and how those things fit in their own lives, and they are better able to take action without waiting for or depending on teachers and prescribed curriculum.

Place for dialogue in The Circle School

Ana: So, where is the place of dialogue? And I'm now switching a little bit toward that. And definitely there is a lot of dialogue, but how do you see... What types, what kinds of dialogues take place? When?

Jim: Well, since this is having to do with dialogic pedagogy, I need to ask, from your perspective as a dialogic scholar, what is dialogue?

Ana: Alright. A dialogue is a way to create meaning, something that makes sense between people in a certain time and place. … In a dialogue there are meaningful things going on. People make sense of their lives. So, in education, we're telling each other things that we are interested in, and they mean something to us in some sense.

And we stand behind that what we say. Or we get surprised. Or I'm asking a lot of questions out of curiosity because I don't know exactly how something is working, or what does something mean to you? And then I'm telling you what does it mean for me or asking myself, what does this mean to me? In a sense, do I like it, do I don't like it, where I see the difference, maybe I see or maybe disagree partially. I see alternatives, or something like that.

I think that educational dialogue is about examining the world. It's critical dialogue. This doesn't have to be something very strange that we don't do every day.

In a dialogue, you start to question things, and to bring in potential examples to see what the boundaries and shapes are of whatever you're claiming about the reality. So, education is about how we understand reality, one part; another, how we understand each other; another part is how we understand what's good and bad. And so, all the spheres of life can be opened and examined in dialogue.[6]

Jim: Okay. And so the question is, where is the dialogue in democratic schooling?

Ana: Yes.

Dialogue about existential issues

Jim: I would say that it emerges from existential needs and situational challenges. I think if a person's basic physical needs are met, food, shelter, security, and then...

Dialogue, you can't keep human beings from dialoguing. Meaning making is really an essential part of human being. And democratic schooling throws people together in a community which necessarily leads to negotiation of one sort or another.

[6] Our colleague, Eugene Matusov, pointed out that the above was not a full definition of a critical dialogue. I agree. One of the most important aspects of the critical dialogue I missed to mention above, is that critical dialogue entails deconstructive testing of all participants' differing ideas, which are valued for their diversity, and the potential to lead the participants to new internally persuasive truths making a difference in their personal outlooks, values, desires, etc., without necessary agreeing with the others or leading to collaboration.

<<**Eugene, 2021-12-25**: Why? Why can't people just move away from each other?

Jim, 2022-01-24: Tell that to the Democrats and Republicans! Rules and policies apply to everyone, so separation isn't possible.>>

Conflict, tension between differing meanings, and it's a stage on which existential needs are experienced and met or not met, but a venue in which people can pursue satisfaction of those existential needs. Community generates, as I point out in the book (Rietmulder, 2019), an endless stream of situational challenges that all require meaning-making, much of that meaning-making in dialogue with other people.

Dialogue in pedagogy as informal culture making

Jim: Well, the highest volume of dialogue is probably in the informal culture making.

Like "Let's go build a Fort. Okay. Well, how should we do that? Well, um, and why will this work? Why won't that work?"

So, that's not only dialogue, ontological dialogue, but there's also a significant amount of pedagogy going on there. If you accept the broader definition of pedagogy, it doesn't require the parties to be in the functional roles of teacher and student, that is. And both parties can be ignorant of the subject matter and you're still willing to call that pedagogy so, right. This is what I understand you accept as dialogic pedagogy.

That reminds me of commerce as another area that stimulates lots and lots of dialogue. We have a free enterprise condition so that whoever wants to sell something can put it on one of the sales tables. At The Circle School, we have two tables reserved for things that are for sale. Lots of it is food, but lots of it is not food. And sometimes a small group of people, either a pair or usually not more than probably three or four people at once, although sometimes it could be a Corporation. Anyway, some group will decide to together enter into some kind of entrepreneurial venture. And so then there's dialogue within that group in order to do their thing. But then of course, just the sales transactions themselves, customers and sellers and buyers, getting together.

The corporations themselves also produce lots of conditions that stimulate dialogue. And some of it is entrepreneurial. One of the groups, I think it's the Gardening Corporation, is selling quesadillas. The sale is on Thursdays. And so, there's lots of organizing around that project.

Then, there are field trips. There's another whole area. We had a group do a field trip to the West coast. It took them two years to prepare for it. Another group did almost two years in planning for a trip to Europe, and all of that involved a huge amount of critical thinking and dialogue.

Ana: What were the things that they were discussing? Like what was in the plans for the trip to Europe?

Jim: Well, for the trip to Europe, one of the big early issues was, should they sign up for a tour or should they plan a trip independent of any agency? And they did a lot of exploration, learning about what's available and discussing the pros and cons of it. If we are with a tour group, then we must follow their schedule to predetermined ends; if not we can adapt our plans as we go. In a sense then, a packaged trip is less in the spirit of dialogue!…

That kind of a trip involved a huge number of logistical and financial needs that needed to be addressed too. How are we gonna make the money to make this trip happen? And to what degree should we each pay from our independent sources and to what degree should the group pay?

They visited Denmark, Sweden and Germany, and they opted not for a tour group, but to plan their own itinerary, which made it a very, very different experience. But it was those discussions of what will the experience be like one way or the other. So, yeah, lots of fruitful ground for dialogue in that kind of project.

So then, it's not only dialogue [that takes place], it's dialogic pedagogy as culture making in that informal setting.

School Judicial Practice

Jim: And then there are institutions within the school that demand dialogue, such as the school's judicial system, the school's legislative processes, the corporation business. Transacting business with any of the corporations' use of any societal space, equipment, supplies necessarily entails dialogue and dialogic process with others. But I think human beings are drawn to dialogue just innately.

Ana: Oh, definitely. There's no mystery about that.

Jim: So, I think what democratic schools do is remove the barriers to dialogue that exist in conventional schooling. We're putting people together. There's very high social-cultural bandwidth in democratic schools, because there isn't a "sage on the stage", there isn't a teacher standing in front of the classroom lecturing and there isn't a classroom of kids silent while they're working on worksheets.

Ana: Mm-hmm. So, from that point of view, nobody is imposing some correct point of view or correct meaning or correct answer to life to the children or students.

Jim: We're not demanding that they absorb it.

<< Eugene Matusov, 2021-12-25: [Could we consider this as an example of what Bakhtin called] "[c]onsciousnesses with equal rights?"[7]>>

Ana: But on the other hand, let's say I don't see much dialogue about certifying children to use equipment in order to be in the art room. There are certain rules that are not questioned at that moment. It's true that at some other moment these rules could be opened up and dialogued about and changed.

Jim: Oh, I meant dialogue during the process of certification. Certainly, there's dialogue in creating them, but I was thinking of when you wanna go use something and you've gotta learn about how to do it. It's theoretically possible for someone to get certified by reading the documents and not engaging much with another human being, but that's pretty rare. I think more than 99% of the time, it involves at least a conversation, and it's pretty hard for that conversation not to enter into the realm of dialogue. There's always give and take, neither the presenter of the rules nor the document itself is in any way complete. And again, no two people are the same, everybody who comes to that table to do the certification has a different set of meanings to start with and will take different meanings from what they're presented with. And then in actual use of whatever it is, whether it's materials, equipment, or space, there's still great uncertainty, and it seems to me that uncertainty about meaning is often the beginning of dialogue.

So I see dialogue in a... Not just in the process of creating the certifications, but in transmitting them as well and in using them day-to-day.

In contrast, judicial committee, it seems to me, is just loaded with dialogue that involves everybody in the school, some people more than others, but it's tremendously about meaning making from the rules. "Why do we have this rule? If I do this, why does it violate the rule? Or why doesn't it? Or why doesn't this rule... Why doesn't this rule say what we mean?" And that's a huge one. [chuckle]

Ana: Can you... give any examples?

Jim: Oh my, every rule in the law book! Every time a law is proposed, what just absolutely amazes, and, I guess, delights me, too, is – someone will propose the rule. Really, really simple rule, or at least looks simple on the face. And then, within minutes of when the discussion of it starts on the floor of a School

[7] In Bakhtin's (1999) philosophical framework of ethical ontological dialogism, genuine meaning-making takes place among "a plurality of [unique] consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, [that] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (Bakhtin, 1999, pp. 6, italics are in the original).

Meeting, you realize, "Holy smokes! This does not say what I thought it said!" Or it says something different to different people. And so, a rule that might have 10 words in it can be debated for two weeks before we've come to a common understanding, and a common understanding isn't good enough, because that common understanding has to be captured in words. So that a year from now, when someone who wasn't part of this discussion sees it, they may take the meaning we intend rather than some other meaning. And so talking about how to accomplish that, how do we write in words what we've now agreed on or understood together? How do we write in words something that's gonna convey that meaning to somebody who wasn't part of this discussion? And it will not, right. Which is why rules are coming up every week for amendment or repeal or brand-new rules.

And it gets so frustrating for so many people when we think we have a really simple concept and yet we've now talked about it for an hour, but we can't find... We haven't found the words that we all agree on [chuckle].

So, yeah, I think many of the rules, most of the rules that are in the law book, if we could trace the history of them to the original discussion, we'd probably find that. And of course, the original discussion never ends because everybody brings new meaning to it.

Ana: But the democratic school, has to make some decisions.

Jim: Judicial committee has to bring finality, has to decide whether or not a rule was broken...

Ana: Is that where the clash between dialogue and democracy may be?

Jim: So, where's the clash?

Ana: The clash is that you have to make a rule, whether you end the dialogue or not, you have to end on something that's tangible as a decision and captured in some words. At least, temporarily.

Jim: Yeah, it's always temporary. And of course, judicial committee actions can be appealed, and then the dialogue keeps on going. And that's no different than any other kind of finality or decision-making.

Dialogue vs. "definitive" knowledge

Ana: What about when it comes to actually discussing some kind of academic material? Something that is about math or physics or philosophy or aesthetics or literature. It's more obvious that people have different opinions, but what about these other areas that seem like... What is there to discuss about and to explore? Or about new laws or something like that?

Jim: Well, I do most of the SAT math tutoring, which involves a large amount of algebra and geometry. In those SAT tutoring situations, the dialogue is mostly about the SAT and its meaning to the individuals who are working on it, and how and why the problems and multiple-choice answers are selected by the test makers. But if they're interested in the math itself, well, then the focus is on doing and understanding algebra and geometry. In any case, the dialogue is about the meaning to the individuals who are working on it. It's not about some absolute meaning.

Ana: No. There probably is never an absolute meaning.

Jim: Right. And so, anything that you point to, Newton's laws, the dialogue may not be about the law per se; the dialogue is about what meaning it has to you and to me.

Another significant, substantial area of dialogue is the judicial system. It's not only about the law book and the laws; it's about the "facts," and I'm putting "facts" in quotes here. One of the things the judicial committee is required to do in each case is to compose a statement of findings, which is the statement of what the judicial committee believes "really" happened. And I'm putting "really" in quotes, too.

And so, there's tremendous dialogic room in that. And one of the guidelines for doing that is to avoid language that... Or distinguish between language that characterizes or interprets rather than language that is "purely," in quotes, purely descriptive. So, the finding is “that wall is light green.” Even that, of course, is debatable. But that's better than saying, "That wall is greenish," or "That wall is an ugly color." Okay, there's an interpretation.

And so, this tremendous dialogue about what are the "facts" in a given case. Again, “facts” being in quotes, as it almost always has to be. And then there's dialogue about that dialogue! That is, "Well, how can we determine what happened? Or how can we avoid characterizing?" Because some laws have to do with the characterization. Some laws get at intent. And of course, you can never know somebody else's intent; you can only know your own intent, and even that is sometimes debatable.

Ana: “What’s my intent?” “I don't know.” [chuckle]

Jim: Right. "I don't know" is an honest answer. So, I think in the judicial committee in particular, dialogue can get to sort of second-, third-tier dialogue where it's dialogue about dialogue about dialogue, in effect...

> <<**Eugene, 2021-12-25**: It is interesting how you, Jim, shifted back to social justice dialogue from academic dialogue.
>
> **Jim, 2022-01-04**: Interesting observation! Hmm… It’s interesting how you, Eugene, equated judicial committee dialogue with “social justice”. ☺ Social justice is the focus of a small subset of judicial committee dialogue, but the examples I used are about finding “facts”, not about social justice. Consideration of “social justice” may come later.
>
> It’s also interesting that you find importance in the distinction between “social justice” dialogue and “academic” dialogue. I suppose in our democratic schooling environment, taxonomies of knowledge and of dialogue are less prominent than in an “academic” environment. For example, I’m not thinking of important qualitative differences in my experience of dialogue in judicial committee and dialogue about traditional academic subjects and dialogue about legislative proposals. I suppose the absence of a credentialing function in democratic schooling may free us up to do a less constrained form of “academic” dialogue – for example, freedom to move from “algebra” to parallel concepts in School Meeting’s parliamentary procedure or, say, a legislative proposal that will be voted soon. Dialogue can lead anywhere, right?
>
> I wonder… I suppose “dialogic pedagogy” is a subset of pedagogy. But is “pedagogical dialogue” a subset of “dialogue”? Or is it an oxymoron? >>

Ana: Right. That's very interesting.

Jim: Democratic schools’ legislative and judicial processes commonly engage all students, 4-year-olds right on up, in dialogue that, I believe, is more dialogically sophisticated, more personally meaningful, and more frequent than is common in traditional and modern schools.

Ana: So do you think that democratic schools are the only kinds of schools that actually enable and make room, better to say: freedom, for unlimited dialogue?

Jim: No, I don't. I don't think the democratic schools are a perfect or final form of schooling. I think that there are some very positive strengths about democratic schooling, and I think the values of democratic schooling and the values that we're talking about, values of dialogue, can absolutely... I shouldn't say “absolutely” [chuckle]. Dialogic values can be implemented in programs that are structured in other ways. I think that those other ways, I'm inclined to think that there has to be something democratic about them. But to be democratic doesn't mean to be a democratic school, that is, democratic in the sense that there has to be some kind of rootedness in the value of each perspective. And I think that that's an almost inherently democratic value.

Ana: See, this is what I'm thinking as the main principle of the life together in democratic school like The Circle School, is everybody's voice has equal rights to come out and to influence the life of the community.

Dialogue and "expert" knowledge

Ana: When it comes to education itself, not everybody's voice may be equal, because there are experts and there are novices. There are people who already know because it has been studied and concluded by the experts that "such-and-such a law of thermodynamics… states that…" Especially in science, but also in history or maybe some other things.

Jim: Democratic schooling does not imply rejection of expertise. Having said that, I will say that there are many democratic schoolers who do reject expertise, but that doesn't make it...

Ana: When you say reject expertise, in what way, child's expertise? Or...

Jim: In the sense that you're talking about it. That here is someone who has studied science and understands gravity or understands magnetism or electricity, and when they inform us about something that they regard as settled science that... That carries... That is more influential than if someone who has never studied it makes a claim about it. It doesn't...

Ana: In a sense, there is difference in the rights of the opinion. See what I mean?

Jim: Yes, you talked about everybody having equal rights of voice. The way we say it in The Circle School's formal statement of values (we call it "ends we seek") is that everybody's got equal rights to voice and vote. That doesn't mean we should regard everybody's statements as having equal truth value or equal objective correspondence...

Ana: And see, this is where I see the difference between dialogue and democratic schooling or democracy in itself. Because in dialogue, in true dialogue, as you said, I would definitely be very interested in how a person could come to a conclusion that "Two and two is one." Or are there possibilities that "Two and two can be anything" (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2018)? By the way, this is a true example. But it is also a metaphor for any kind of dialogue because there may be certain things that you will not agree that they're true but the person who is saying them has a right to and responsibility explain how they see that, or change their opinion, right?

Jim: Yes.

Ana: So in that sense, even if you are a novice, it's a very important thing that you have a right to talk, right to say, right to say how you see, and right to start engaging with that material from your own point of view. So, no discovery would be made if people completely descended from what was expertise knowledge at the time.

Jim: Sure. Sure.

Ana: So maybe somebody tells you, "I really believe there are fairies." In a true dialogue, I wouldn't say, "You're just a kooky person. This is just your fantasy." But I kind of want to know all the evidence for that, all the logic behind that. And I don't have to agree with that at the end, but for the sake of the dialogue, we should value that.

Jim: Well, okay, so two points I wanna make about this: One is that expertise is acknowledged in democratic schools, particularly in debates at School Meeting. Everybody's got an equal right to voice and vote, but not everybody's voice and opinion is regarded in the same way. I was elected as the school's legal affairs officer, have been annually for many years. When a question comes up in School Meeting about how a proposed action or law relates to laws beyond the school, typically I'm the one who's asked, "Jim, tell us, is this legal? Is this not legal?" or "What does this do in terms of liability?"

What I say in response is likely to be more influential than what any five-year-old in the room is going to say. So, I have no right to speak any greater than the five-year-old, but it's likely that the School Meeting collectively is going to regard what I say with greater weight than what the five-year-old says about legalities. So that's one point. Expertise is not dishonored or ignored.

And then second thing... We're trying to get at differences or conflicts between dialogue and democracy, but even where our democratic judicial system, where the rubber meets the road, where pushing comes to shove, or where it really... There's a lot at stake, when the judicial committee finalizes its findings by voting on it, when the judicial committee charges somebody by vote, when the judicial committee imposes a sentence, all of those are finalized in one sense, that is, at least on a temporary basis, it's declared an end of the dialogue.

Ana: Exactly.

Jim: But that's not non-dialogic and it's not a conflict. Decision-making is not in conflict with dialogue... What do I wanna say here? All of those decisions are still open. School Meeting reviews all of those decisions, every week. And even a year later, if somebody said, "You know, I think I was falsely convicted in this case," they could bring it back to School Meeting. I think one of the reasons I oppose capital punishment is because there is a finality to that dialogue. I think it's a denial of due process. So I don't object to... Frankly, I don't object to a society killing somebody because they think an offense has been so great, but I do object to a society determining with that degree of finality that they should die. And so I oppose capital punishment for that reason. But I don't see any incompatibility or conflict between "finalizing" decisions, between finalizing anything and dialogue. Dialogue doesn't imply open-endedness, and democracy doesn't imply rejection of expertise.

Ana: No, I don't think that democracy denies it, but... Let me see how I would explain it the best.

Jim: From an educational point of view, what we don't do in democratic schools is impose expertise.

Ana: That's what I wanted to say.

Jim: Right. We don't say, "You must learn algebra from this person, and you must believe what they're saying, and you can't talk back. You can't argue with what this person says. When JD [a staff person in The Circle School] tells you this or that about scientific laws, you're not allowed to dispute it." We don't do that, we don't demand an unquestioning acceptance of civil authority, and we don't demand an unquestioning acceptance of an academic authority.

Ana: So, you always question. Right, right. Where I see the opposite tendency is just more in practicality. Because in what prevails on everyday level. In dialogue, you can never decide anything because as long as dialogue is dialogue, it's un-finalizable and goes on and on and on, but you wouldn't be able to eat your lunch because nobody was there to cook it, because nobody could agree about how to cook it, [chuckle] or whatever. So, in that sense, that's one of the senses how that dialogue can go against life, [chuckle] because you just gotta finalize many things in order to just survive.

Jim: All day long.

Ana: All day long. That's one sense. Another sense is because it constantly opens up already accepted, or by majority accepted, or traditionally accepted values, understandings, opinions, that if you start to shake them, you may be shaking the whole society. Dialogic education may be anti-social because it's... Dialogue becomes risky, in that sense, because it can open up Pandora's boxes that people are not ready or elementally, don't want them to be.

Jim: So dialogue may... There may be conflict between dialogue and life, but probably not between dialogue and education. I mean, dialogic pedagogy is not dialogic life.

Ana: Yes, but dialogic pedagogy in itself is very non-welcome in traditional school where the student doesn't have a voice but has to accept and memorize, if you go by the litany. And even in progressive schools, the dialogue is limited as long as the students rediscover the same... What we want them to, and finally come to those exact answers.

Jim: You know, the conflicts... Let's see, the issues around expertise and dialogue and expertise in democracy are probably more prominent in the university environment than in primary and secondary schooling. You are in the former, and I'm in the latter. But it would be the rare eight-year-old who wants to study a field in which there's highly developed expertise in a formal way. That's very common at the university level.

Ana: Well, I'm just talking about that funny example with two and two, I just mentioned. There are a lot of things that we start teaching in school as common sense, but some kids don't even get interested in them because they don't make sense to them.

Jim: Right, but I guess what I'm saying is expertise is less of an issue when the question is how much is two plus two, and more of an issue when the question is understanding quantum physics. It takes a lesser degree of expertise to settle some questions than it does to settle some others. It takes less training to be a medical responder at The Circle School than it takes to be a brain surgeon at Harrisburg Hospital.

Ana: Right.

Jim: And so the degree...

Ana: But let's see about just everyday issues. You wrote in your book exactly the same example that came up in a Scandinavian democratic school in the late 60s, that I am studying. In a book that was written by the school leader or director of the school, she wrote about the new technologies that were emerging, that people in this democratic school were just discovering. And this is an example about the question of “who is an expert, and expert in what.” And so, as you know and you accept, that the kids could be experts about something that adults are not experts. The author of the book uses exactly the same example that you used: that one of the big fights they once had in their school Assembly was about whether to buy a “mono-channel tape recorder” or a “stereo tape recorder.” You know, that was the '60s [chuckle]. The young people insisted that the stereo has to be bought. While the old people, who were still living in the past... Those who had to spend the money or get the money, they could not see how the younger people were much more experts about these technologies than they (the older people) were.

So, who has the right to that expertise? In that sense, it's not a denial of expertise, but the question is then who owns the expertise? Sometimes it's not obvious.

Jim: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Ana: Okay, maybe nuclear physics, yes. But there are many, many areas of life where adult people just because they are adult, think that they have more expertise than children.

Jim: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And not just in technology, but there are many things about the school that kids know a whole lot more than I do. I mean, even young children will sometimes help me understand what's required to use certain materials in the art room. So, when I'm taking families on tours, it's not uncommon for some child to overhear my conversation and then correct me when I'm making a statement about what's required to use the finger paints, for example. And I may be generalizing in a way that they hear as being a false statement, and they'll correct me.

So, I suppose we are each expert on the things that we have need or want to be expert in, and young kids are certainly capable of that kind of expertise.

Dialogues across age groups

Jim: One of the features of democratic schools is the mixed ages that we talked about a bit. I love the mixed ages as a subject all of itself. But especially as it relates to this conversation: the opportunities for dialogue, because it's mixed ages and because it's a relatively small group - 88, we'll have 87 kids of all ages when we go back in January 2020. Games like “Capture the flag”[8] or “Pickle.”[9] Games can involve 20 or more people sometimes of mixed ages. And so, the selection of games and rules has to be such that it's fun and challenging for people of vastly different abilities. And that requires a lot of negotiation and planning and dialogue over time. I mean, you may, you may play a game 10 times and find that it's no fun for the little kids because whatever, and then the rules may evolve over time, through dialogue until you hit a winner.

Yeah. And as a little kid, you see, you encounter this culture that's there and you want to become part of that and play with everybody. And suddenly you are learning these new games, new rules, new songs or whatever goes on. And that's the source of new information.

So, the question about where is the dialogue in democratic schools? Maybe like, I guess where I'm coming to is, it's pretty much the same as in the world beyond school. I mean many of the same things that come up in the world beyond school that, that foster, cultivate, or require dialogue happen in democratic schools.

Dialogic pedagogy and democratic education

Jim: Well, I guess I'm still curious, have we identified conflicts or incompatibilities between either dialogue and democracy, or between dialogic pedagogy and democratic schools?

Ana: Well, coming back to what we were talking about... The focus on the pedagogy itself, which means the instruction, and the focus on life, I think, result in a completely different way of where a dialogue is taking place, how is it taking place, why is it taking place, etc. So, when it comes to the judicial committee, you are... It's life necessity to do certain things that creates that dialogue. Dialogic pedagogy does not necessarily relate to an urgent life necessity. And I think that's where there is a difference.

I still remember our talks from 10 years ago, when Eugene [Matusov] and I just visited you for the first time, and we just started dialoguing. And when you said, "I will not go and engage some child in critical thinking just because I think something is interesting and impose on that child." I remember it was some very interesting, playful thing that a child told you and you just did not use it as an opportunity for a dialogue. Now, after reading your book, I think that it's because you're not focused on instruction. And dialogic pedagogy is focused on “instruction” – ways of learning about something.

Jim: Okay. Well, there are pockets of time and place in democratic schools when the focus is on direct instruction. And in those situations, whatever constitutes dialogic pedagogy can certainly take place but doesn't necessarily. But I think one of the important factors is that when direct instruction is taking place in a democratic school, there is still... It's within a dialogue, and the dialogue is how shall we approach this material? And that might be an explicit dialogue, but it might just be implied or part of the context. So, I might be sitting at this very table with a student and doing something that, to an outside observer, could not possibly be described as dialogic pedagogy because we're doing memorization, or we're doing recitation, or we're doing... Or I'm the expert and simply conveying... Just transmitting information to the student: There's a clear student and a clear teacher. An expert and a novice. And yet, I would maintain that that is different from the same actions happening in the context of another... Of a non-democratic school. Because here, if that's happening at this table, in this room, in this school, then the student and the teacher, the expert and the novice, both know that at any moment, either the "teacher" or the

[8] See the rules here: https://www.verywellfamily.com/how-to-play-capture-the-flag-1257384
[9] See the rules here: https://www.playworks.org/game-library/pickle/

"student" can question the methodology itself and say, "I like this approach of you telling me the facts, and I am receptive to it." Or saying, "You know, I don't like the way we're doing this, Jim. Let's do it a different way." Or I could say as the person who's the teacher, or the expert, I could say, "You know, it seems like this isn't going well for you. You're not... There's something about this that's not satisfying or fulfilling for you. Am I right about that? I think it's because maybe we could try a different approach." So, whether that actual conversation happens or not, the whole direct instruction thing is wrapped inside a dialogic context.

Ana: That's an interesting way to put it, because it's just a moment in a larger dialogically valued life, maybe.

Jim: Yes, whereas in a different school setting, another kind of school, the dialogic context isn't present. And so, it becomes... It may become oppressive for the student, or even if it doesn't become oppressive, there's still there's still something absolute about it.

Ana: So if you said, "Okay, let's try to do this to memorization, let's try it," and so, okay, that looks like he's trying to memorize whatever, a poem, and you are here to correct or not correct or help out or something like that, or multiplication table. And so, it looks like [a] drill, but it might not be, because it's a self... It may be a drill, but both of you decided on. But because you own that and you know why you're doing that, and the student knows why they're doing that.

Jim: Another way of coming at that same issue is that in traditional and modern schools, the teacher, of course, has the academic authority, but the teacher also has civil authority over the students in the room. In a democratic school, I may be the person with the academic authority but not the civil authority. The civil authority resides equally in me and the student and in school meeting, and I think that makes a big difference. *That separation of civil authority from academic authority is important.* And by civil authority, I mean the authority to make rules and enforce rules and unilaterally find facts, the way the JC[10] does. That's a civil authority, whereas the academic authority is that I do know algebra better than you do, and yes, I can tell you exactly what's what in that field, and if you don't believe me, you're dumb [chuckle]. That would be dialogic, even in the academic… No, that wouldn't be dialogic, but that would be the stance.

Ana: In dialogic pedagogy, your expertise is also open to yourself for questioning.

Jim: Yeah, yeah.

Ana: So, you step into that dialogue with your student bringing different types of expertise in the same, but both of these expertises can be shaken.

Jim: Yeah, yeah.

Ana: Because they're both open for examination.

Jim: Some things more than others, but yes.

Ana: Right, because the student could say, "Prove me that that's true. Anyway, I don't believe you."

Jim: Yeah.

Ana: They have that right, even if they don't have examples.

Jim: Yep.

Ana: Correct, so it would be your responsibility to find the proof or whatever. So that means you have to open up your knowledge and re-examine it again.

[10] Short for "Judicial Committee."

What does "pedagogy" mean in "dialogic pedagogy"?

Jim: We had a long discussion earlier about pedagogy with primarily me asking. Doesn't the word "pedagogy" refer to direct instruction, in your view? My understanding was that when you use the word, or when people use the word *pedagogy*, they're talking about direct instruction. There's a teacher. And pedagogy is the teacher's set of skills … delivering some information or, or training for skills. Or cultivating mastery of a subject domain. But no matter which one of those it is, it's… it's about a teacher and a student (or students).

And I think my question to you, if you have two people who are equally ignorant of a subject, can pedagogy still occur?

Ana: Yes. Because when you say equally ignorant, they may be ignorant, but in different ways! And their mutual differences will bring out some dialogue. One of them knows one thing more and the other one knows something else more, about the same subject. It's not the same type of ignorance. Ignorance has different sides. That's one thing.

Another thing, I think, when I say pedagogy, especially dialogic pedagogy, I don't mean direct instruction. [Although, dialogic pedagogy may involve direct instruction it is not primarily about direct instruction]. In general, for me, pedagogy is creating, "arranging," events through which people will learn intentionally [and unintentionally]. You can do it in a dialogic way, which is not to lead the students towards anything predefined. In fact, even if you don't know things, you can still arrange for the students to be creative in their learning. I don't even want to say "arrange" because it's manipulative. But to be always curious, and to know why, how, and for what purpose they want to know something.

> << **Eugene Matusov, 2021-12-25:** Thanks for making this comment. I agree. But… what term would you use instead for the teacher's or even student's guiding efforts? **Ana, 2022-01-04**: Maybe it would be better to say, "your guidance could still have a purpose to support creativity in learning and teaching"?>>

And a critical question is to involve the students in asking such questions. So, in that sense, dialogic pedagogy is creating opportunities for people to explore. And within that – the students' own purposeful exploration – you may do some direct instruction.

Jim: But what if both parties are, are ignorant, substantially ignorant of the subject being explored? What's the source? There has to be some source or sources...

Ana: Oh, yeah. The source of subject of exploration is not just in the immediate people. It's all over around us. They can together go and ask somebody or find resources: books or internet, or people who know. Or a source that helps them decide how, "how shall we explore that?"

Jim: So dialogic pedagogy happens, if you have two people who are ignorant of a subject and they together explore it in engaged, in authentic, in ontological dialogue between themselves. Right. Then, maybe both are in the role of teacher, and both are in the role of student, but they're exploring together. Maybe they get on a computer and they Google information or maybe they go out and they try to build a fort and they discover that they can't build it the way they were imagining and they're talking back and forth. In your view, is that what constitutes dialogic pedagogy?

Ana: In my view, what is important is that the original question always comes from the student. Somebody who wants to learn, who is interested in something, has the question. And that's the biggest difference from regular schooling, even progressive schooling where the teachers are those who ask the questions – and they ask them not to learn, but to check how well the students came to the preset endpoints.

In dialogic pedagogy, it is the student who has a question. We can both be students, but we can, we can both be teachers, if we want to really create deeper opportunity for exploration. So, if there are two

kids playing in sand, building a fort and asking each other questions and you happen to be there... And, let's say, you are somebody who has more experience in it, and they ask you a question, you could teach both of them. But they're there, **they're** asking questions. You can get involved in their dialogue and deepen their questions.

In a sense, you can show them possible alternative ways of looking at things that would never occur to them. But **they're asking** these questions. In that dialogue you can, you can open ways for them to explore further then they might do it themselves. Obviously if there are two people equally ignorant and nobody else to turn to, they will trudge on their own and maybe… "rediscover America," right? Or maybe something else? But yet, as somebody who is an adult or just knows more, you can answer their questions. However, being dialogical is not because you know the right answer. You can create opportunities for more. You can actually enrich their alternative possibilities of exploration in such a way that their environment, then becomes richer.

> <<**Eugene, 2021-12-25**: I think you are struggling here about a possibility of a true dialogue between a knowledgeable person and an ignorant person. I addressed this issue with my notion of the "collapse of knowledge", with the idea that knowledge itself is a social construct. We know only with other people. An encounter with an ignorant person makes our knowledge (partially) collapse in us. What do you think? Jim, it seems you struggle with (or puzzled by) the opposite problem: how dialogue among ignorant people is possible.
>
> **Jim, 2022-01-04**: "Struggle with … how dialogue among ignorant people is possible…"? Not really; I'm quite content with Ana's point that people are ignorant in different ways and the space in between is where dialogue can happen.
>
> I think I struggle more with reconciling "dialogue" and "pedagogy". See next comment…>>

Jim: So dialogic pedagogy or pedagogy period doesn't require a pedagogue. It requires information or knowledge from somewhere, but that doesn't have to come from the teacher pedagogue. Okay. All right.

> <<**Eugene, 2021-12-25**: NO! Jim, you don't understand. You seem to focus on knowledge and not on meaning. For you, education is still transmission of knowledge.
>
> **Jim, 2022-01-04**: I guess I think the education industry (sorry to say) is so overly dedicated to credentials and measurement of knowledge and technique that it's hard for me to avoid those connotations in the words "education" and "pedagogy."
>
> Wikipedia says "Pedagogy […] is the study of how knowledge and skills are imparted in an educational context…" Sounds like transmission of knowledge to me. However, that sentence does go on to say "…and it considers the interactions that take place during learning." So maybe there's room for dialogic pedagogy after all. ☺ >>

Pluralism of educational approaches

Jim: I think I said in our dialogue, different staff members will handle it differently. There are... I know some people who just get in other people's faces all the time, and they intervene in ways that I just... It just would appall me. But they get away with it somehow. And that's just the way they are. And they could say something to a kid who would brush them off, whereas if I say it, the kid might feel they have to do something about it. So, I don't mean to say that every democratic school staff member should handle situations in some uniform or even consistent way. What I do with one student might be very different than what I do with another, or what I do with one student on Tuesday might be very different than the way I respond on Thursday. People change, I change, they change, circumstances change. So, I think it's really important also to say that the... And this is also a difference between democratic schooling and certain other kinds of schooling, where it is either implied or explicit that a teacher should respond in a certain way, in a certain situation.

And I think that's much less true in democratic schools, that the emphasis is more on community and community means no two situations are ever alike, no two people, no two moments, no two sets of circumstances. And so, there isn't any “party line”, there isn't any way that staff are supposed to be compatible with the school's philosophy.

Ana: Well, that's another thing that I wanted to talk to about, this pluralism of... Tolerance for the pluralism. And no party line, as you say, well, all other, I think, educational approaches have their party line, like, "This is the right way to do that."

Jim: And I would say our party line is at another level of abstraction. It's a meta-party line, maybe. By that, I mean the party line is that we have no party line. As I wrote in my book, The Circle School represents a “theory of schooling” rather than a “theory of education” or “theory of learning.” The school is a venue rather a program or curriculum. So we aren’t bound to any particular methods of “education” or “learning” and the school can host any teaching/learning methods. Our staff are free to be authentically interacting with children in a relatively unfettered way.

Now that I think about it in the way you mentioned earlier, I suppose that means all pedagogy at The Circle School is dialogic in a sense, because the context and methodology are themselves part of the dialogue and not constrained by any curriculum, credentialing, or instructional modes. So a student could say “I want you to teach me algebra in a strict, authoritarian way with homework and grades and no choice of assignments.” After talking about why and so on, maybe I would agree to that, or not and we’d keep talking. But no matter what, at any time – for example, weeks later – either the student or I could say no, I’ve had enough. And then the dialogue about context and process would be re-opened and who knows where it would go?

So maybe at The Circle School dialogic pedagogy is inescapable in a sense, at some level, even though some classes and teacher-student interactions wouldn’t look dialogic. Maybe, in that sense, non-dialogic pedagogy is impossible at The Circle School? In any case, if we have a party line, it’s not apples-to-apples with other schools. It’s meta.

Ana: It's a meta-party line, yes.

Jim: So, well, let's see, what do we expect of staff? We do expect staff to comply with the policies set by School Meeting. We don't... We wouldn't tolerate, or we don't wanna tolerate civil disobedience in that sense, but those policies don't dictate interactions.

Ana: So, were any situations where staff was really unhappy about the policies of the School Meeting and have to constrain themselves?

Jim: Sure!

Ana: Give an example.

Jim: Well, I proposed the rule that would ban glitter from the school, and it got defeated.

Ana: And you were really unhappy about that?

Jim: Well, if I was really that unhappy, I could propose the rule again and again, and then people would think that I am being really a pain in the butt, but no, not big policies. If a staff member has philosophical objections to giving kids a vote, then they're just not gonna be happy. They probably aren't gonna be on staff, but that is what we expect from staff. We expect staff to honor and uphold the system, the structures, of the school, but that's a different level of abstraction than expecting staff to behave in a pedagogical way with students. So, one staff member may employ traditional teaching methods, and another staff member may employ solely dialogic methods. And I don't see any problem with it.

Ana: No incompatibility about that.

Jim: Yeah, there's no incompatibility with that. It may turn out that students prefer one over the other, or maybe students generally prefer one method in one situation and another method in another. But I think that the personal connection between the person who's serving as teacher and the person who's in a student role is more important than the teaching method in many situations, that relationship and the... The way it works or doesn't work for the student is likely to have a greater influence than the techniques.

Concluding reflections

At the outset, we asked what is the place, in a democratic school, for dialogue, and for dialogic pedagogy. For me (Jim), a newcomer to the study of dialogic pedagogy and an old hand at democratic schooling, the answers are now clearer. I want to comment on two aspects of those questions: (1) the *scope* of the pedagogical dialogue, and (2) the role of *non-curricular* dialogue.

Scope of pedagogical dialogue

In modern and progressive schools, dialogue may be deployed by teachers aiming to have students reach curricular objectives. In my understanding, this is the most common form of "dialogic pedagogy." The dialogue may be authentic, wide-ranging, and deeply rewarding for students and teachers, and may be effective as a way to reach curricular objectives.

Generally, in those settings, selection of content and methodology are outside the scope of the teacher-student dialogue, having been preset by the syllabus, the curriculum, the school, or the school board. The educational ends are thus set before the teacher initiates dialogue along the way. At times, that dialogue may wander away from curricular objectives, and, at times, the dialogue may help to achieve the teacher's non-curricular objectives (to be discussed shortly). Such excursions may be fruitful in various ways, but the teacher's duty is to curtail dialogic excursions as necessary to reach the preset destinations.

In contrast, in The Circle School and other democratic schools, neither the school nor the teacher predetermines content or methodology. The school is a cauldron of dialogues – in pairs or groups, spontaneous or planned, unconstrained as to subject and purpose – from which may bubble up ideas for projects, activities, classes, book discussions, field trips, and so on. Further dialogue might result in concrete plans for some sort of engagement, typically including a defined scope of study (content) and how to go about it (methodology). Start to finish, throughout the engagement, all matters are open for further dialogue and re-negotiation. The content and methodology can change at any time. Dialogic excursions may lead to "stepping-stone" inquiries, traversing subjects and methodologies as the dialogue evolves – over hours, weeks, or even years.

Thus, in democratic schools, the scope of pedagogical dialogue is greater – embracing not only the dialogue initiated by the teacher to reach curricular objectives, but also a selection of content and methodology to begin with, and also tracking the evolution of the inquiry.

Role of non-curricular dialogue

In my (Jim) experience, most teachers in most settings hold valued aims and ideals beyond the formal, explicit curricular objectives; typically, aims to promote the general development and well-being of their students, regardless of curricular content and methodology. Sometimes these aims are skillfully integrated and thus pursued simultaneously with curricular aims. Often, non-curricular aims are pursued in peripheral moments: digressions from curricular pursuit, or in the margins such as before and after class, in office hours, homeroom, study halls, or incidental encounters elsewhere. In any case, I think most teachers highly value this non-curricular aspect of their work, even though it's usually unspoken and out of sight. For some, their non-curricular aims are their primary motivation for teaching, with curricular aims and

duties serving merely as the means by which their real lifework is enabled. Despite its secondary institutional status in modern and progressive schools, non-curricular teacher-student dialogue is highly valued by teachers and usually, in my experience, also highly valued by students.

In democratic schools, the role of non-curricular dialogue is primary, not secondary; and central, not peripheral. Rather than curriculum generating dialogue, it's dialogue that generates curriculum. As in other kinds of schools, there's still plenty of space for the classroom practice of dialogic pedagogy to achieve curricular aims. Thus occurs a repeating sequence or cycle: dialogic planning (selection of content and method) followed by content exploration (perhaps dialogic) followed by ongoing dialogic adjustment (or stepping-stones). We might say democratic schools feed students a curriculum sandwich on dialogic bread – dialogue above and below – except that the dialogue parts are just as meaty, if not more so, than the content parts.

Furthermore, large helpings of non-curricular dialogue that remain informal and non-curricular also provide abundant opportunities for those non-curricular aims of promoting students' development and well-being – in settings that are primary and central in the school's educational program. Ultimately, then, the distinction between "curricular" and "non-curricular" may fade and vanish.

In summary, I see both the *scope* and the *role* of dialogue being greater in democratic schools than in other kinds of schools. Thus, the school itself and its students' education might properly be characterized equally well as democratic and dialogic. Answering our original question, I find that dialogue in democratic schools is pervasive and essential.

Life, freedom, dialogue, and education in a democratic school

One of the primary drives of the progressive schooling is to return life into the deadening grind of the schoolish learning. "You have to find a key to each of your students' minds and hearts, to teach them well" is one of the core mantra's of the progressivist teachers' desires (Matusov, 2021). The emphasis here is on "to teach them well" – as the students in progressive schools are still regarded as subjects to a teacher's pedagogical action, who need to be motivated, molded, or taught, rather than considered "*a plurality of consciousnesses*, *with equal rights and each with its own world"* (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 6). Bakhtin considered the equality of consciousnesses to be one of the main conditions for a genuine dialogue – where the participants are "*not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse.*" (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 7).

I (Ana) think what I learned about democratic education is that the students and the staff in a democratic school, are first and foremost partners with equal rights of consciousness and personhood in creating their life in this "scaled-down" society, where "students and staff together manage legislative, judicial, and executive functions of the school, in sort of a scaled-down version of American governments (federal, state, and local)" (Jim, above, pp 9-10). At the same time, it is also understood that learning and education belong to the bubble of the student's personal (negative) freedom (Berlin, 2006), where the student has the full right of evaluation and decision-making. In that sense, democratic schools do not have to "return life" into the school, they are based on and thrive on life itself. Their purpose is not "to teach well," but to create opportunities for the students to live well. And life itself belongs to students who have the freedom to search, examine, and deliberate, through endless dialogues what for each one of them uniquely means to live well.

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