



A happy system crasher at home and in conventional and democratic schools



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Abstract

Often, “system crashers” are portrayed as disturbed children (students) who actively break the institutional system work and disturb relationships with other people. However, some system crashers are perfectly happy children who, precisely due to their happiness, liveliness, and rich imagination, do not fit into a conventional school. In this paper, I provide a detailed case of such a happy system crasher at home and in conventional and democratic schools. I found out that at home, the parents of the system crasher often reflected and rethought their parenting practices, priorities, and values to shelter their child’s happy life, often at a great expense for themselves. In contrast, the conventional school either ignored or punished the happy system crasher to preserve its institutional practices and keep them smooth. I hypothesize that conventional school is aimed at promoting a disciplinary society by making students convenient, obedient, and useful citizens at the expense of the student’s authorial agency. In contrast, parents and democratic schools address a happy system crasher’s disruption of their lives by rethinking and renegotiating their practices. Finally, I argue that happy system crashers are essential for Democratic and Dialogic Education.

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A happy system crasher at home and in a conventional school

It is enough to look at one and the same child at home, in the street, or at school: now you see a vivacious, curious child, with a smile in his eyes and on his lips, seeking instruction in everything, as he would seek pleasure, clearly and frequently strongly expressing his thoughts in his own words; now again you see

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a worn-out, retiring being with an expression of fatigue, terror, and ennui, repeating with the lips only strange words in a strange language, – a being whose soul has, like a snail, retreated into its house. It is enough to look at these two conditions in order to decide which of the two is more advantageous for the child's development.

That strange psychological condition which I will call the scholastic condition of the soul, and which all of us, unfortunately, know too well, consists in that all the higher faculties, imagination, creativeness, and inventiveness, give way to other, semi-animal faculties, which consist in pronouncing sounds independently from any concept, in counting numbers in succession, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, in perceiving words, without allowing imagination to substitute images for these sounds, in short, in developing a faculty for crushing all higher faculties, so that only those might be evolved which coincide with the scholastic condition of fear, and of straining memory and attention.

Every pupil is so long an anomaly at school as he has not fallen into the rut of this semi-animal condition. The moment the child has reached that state and has lost all his independence and originality, the moment there appear in him various symptoms of disease, – hypocrisy, aimless lying, dullness, and so forth, – he no longer is an anomaly: he has fallen into the rut, and the teacher begins to be satisfied with him. Then there happen those by no means accidental and frequently repeated phenomena, that the dullest boy becomes the best pupil, and the most intelligent the worst (Tolstoy, 1967, pp. 16-17).

Often “system crashers” are portrayed as *disturbed* children who not only do not fit the system but who actively break the institutional system work and system relationship (e.g., see the German 2019 movie “System crasher”¹ or the New Zealand 2016 movie “Hunt for the wilderpeople”²). However, some system crashers are perfectly *happy* children who, precisely due to their happiness, liveliness, and rich imagination, do not fit into a conventional school. I was such a child in my first grade in the Soviet Union in the late 1960s. This paper describes my autobiographical experiences. I also consider happy system crashers in democratic educational settings.

Since a happy system crusher is apparently not a well-documented phenomenon, I spend space on autoethnography describing it in detail. I specifically focus on my childish experiences at home and school. I conclude with my reflection on the difference in my parents’ and my teachers’ responses to me being a happy system crusher.

I also want to raise questions of whether system crashers in general and happy system crashers in specific are unavoidable in educational institutions or collective educational enterprises. Or even if a system crusher is a necessarily negative phenomenon in the first place. I will consider (happy) system crashers in a democratic school and my own democratic dialogic higher ed classrooms.

* * *

I loved my first-grade teacher. She was strict, yelling at us a lot, especially at children like me, who often acted in ways that she did not expect. But at the same time, my first-grade teacher introduced many fun and mysterious activities that I really liked. For example, in the middle of writing, she suddenly clapped.

¹ “On her wild quest for love, 9-year-old Benni’s untamed energy drives everyone around her to despair” <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8535968/>.

² “Reclusive country folk Bella and Hector become foster parents to Ricky, a problem child from the city. ... A national manhunt is ordered for a rebellious kid and his foster uncle who go missing in the wild New Zealand bush” <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4698684/>

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We were supposed to stand up quickly but without noise to sing: “We were writing and writing – our fingers got tired.” While we were singing this little song, we had to close and open our fists. The teacher was totally unpredictable to me. I did not know what she would ask us to do next. I liked her unpredictability. Her unpredictability created a possibility for meaningful events for me and, I suspect, other children in the classroom. Apparently, she did not like our unpredictability. When faced with our unpredictability, she became angry and mean.

Once, when my beloved first-grade teacher got sick, I organized my peers to visit her after school. On my suggestion, we went to our homes to collect candies and fruits as gifts for our sick teacher – the cultural script that I was aware of when one visited a sick, dear person. I got my favorite chocolate candies from our home. We got on a bus (another cultural script of visiting an ill teacher): it did not cross our mind that we did not know the teacher’s address – it did not bother us. We felt very proud of doing a good deed, an adult thing, of caring for our teacher by visiting her with our sweet gifts for her. We changed buses several times and walked around unfamiliar areas in the big city of Moscow, imagining how much our teacher would be happy to see us when we finally arrived at her place.

We were found by the police later in the evening. By then, we were completely lost and had eaten all the goodies we had collected for the teacher.

I was punished as the ringleader at school the next day. However, my parents were sympathetic. They told me that knowing the address was crucial for arriving at the targeted place. I was very impressed with this beautiful wisdom. I had never thought about that before because before, I had always arrived at a desired place without much thinking ahead of how to do that – my feet had delivered me there. On the one hand, this wisdom was apparent. On the other hand, it was still mysteriously lost on my peers and me.

Here is another example of my happy system crashes. On the first day of the Physical Education (PE) class, the PE teacher gathered us at the center of the school gym on the basement floor and instructed us on how we should behave at the gym, what kind of sports dress uniform we needed to bring to the next class, and so on. We learned that we were not allowed to run or yell in the gym without the teacher’s explicit permission. We were told that we boys and girls must change our clothes in different dressing rooms. This was new to me because, in my kindergarten, boys and girls had always changed clothes together, visited the same bathroom at the same time, and washed naked together in the summer. When our PE teacher finished his long gym orientation, he asked us: “Do you have questions? Feel free to ask me *any* question.” Nobody asked. I looked around at my peers, then at the teacher, and asked him: “How does water in a river know where to start growing its first ice crystal in the late fall?” The teacher looked perplexed at me and then at my peers. I followed his gaze and also looked at my peers. My peers were apparently OK with my question, but the PE teacher was visibly puzzled. He seemed to try to figure out what exactly he said that prompted my question. My big, much older brother studied *physics* in his 8th grade, and I knew that my question about the first ice crystal fitted PE perfectly well: “*Physical* Education.” To my PE teacher’s credit, he did not yell at me but rather patiently replied after a lo-o-ong pause, “Well, you’ll learn it later.” Later, I learned in school that when the teacher said “later,” it meant “never.”

The school required from us “an agentic state” (Milgram, 1974) – unconditional and unquestionable obedience to its arbitrary demands: its numerous assignments (homework, behavior, classroom activities, etc.). In my first grade, I escaped the school agentic consciousness by populating my assigned homework and class work with my playful fantasies that were very meaningful to me personally. For example, many exercises in Russian (writing) involved filling in omitted words in sentences marked with three dots. In my fantasy, I envisioned a little walking man, going over words in a sentence, only to face a river or a ditch marked by the three dots. Like the little man, I was thinking about what to do – how to cross the dots. I drew

beautiful bridges over the three dots in my textbook or imagined swimming across them. I loved my school. I loved doing homework – I joyfully spent many hours doing my writing exercises. It was so imaginative, so creative, so playful! Although my peers were rarely involved in similar playful activities themselves, they could easily understand and participate in my plays with the school assignments. My teacher yelled at me each time she noticed what I was doing. But her unpredictable yelling and anger only added mystery to my imagination. Somehow, I knew that my teacher was nice inside.

I loved getting bad grades because I loved how my teacher drew her 2s (a failing grade corresponding to an “F”) with all her love that looked to me like a beautiful red swan, swimming on a lake of my notebook page. For me, the well-rounded mark grade 3 (a “C”) looked much more appealing than the angular 4 (a “B”) or the arrogantly bragging 5 (an “A”).

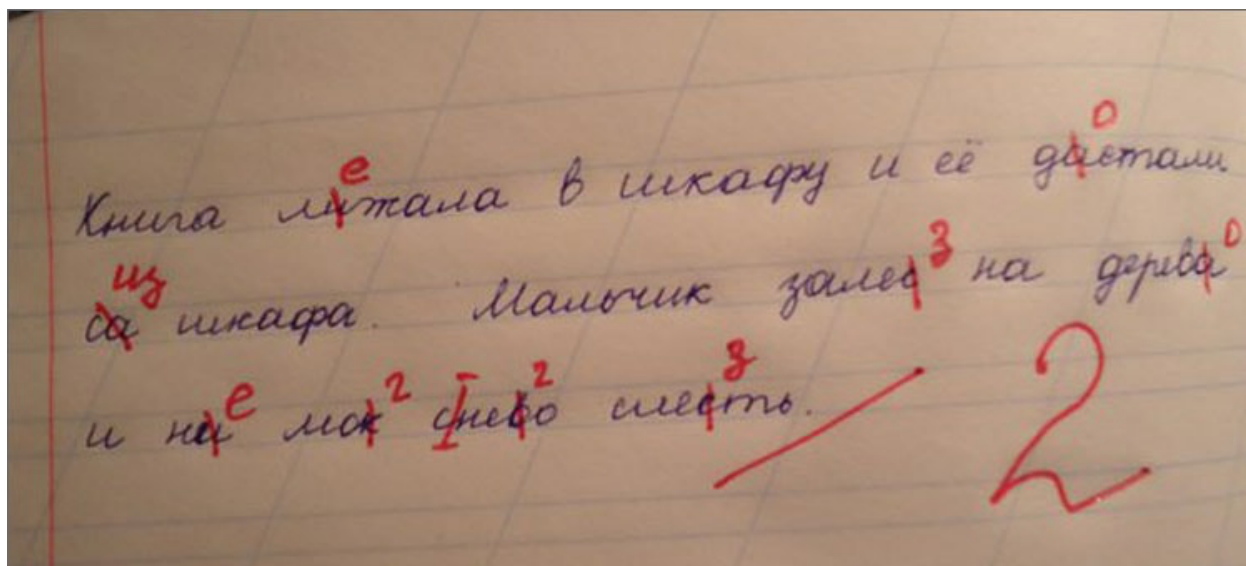


Figure 1. This is typical Russian homework with the teacher's grade mark. My classwork was much less neat, and I made many more mistakes. (Source: https://www.defectologiya.pro/zhumal/opvat_dvojka!_rugat_li_rebenka_za_ploxie_oczenki/)

I was happy to collect as many red swans as possible. At times, in my pleasant anticipation of the teacher's red swan, I carefully drew my own giant blue swan after my home or class assignment. The teacher crossed out my blue swan with her angry strokes and drew her red swan next to mine, but I was happy and thankful: her angry red swans were always much more beautiful than my clumsy blue swans!

There was one academic subject where I got a 5 (an “A”) all the time. It was singing. I loved to sing. The singing teacher arranged us for choral singing. I was standing on a bench with some of my classmates. The other students were standing in front of us. The teacher asked us to put all our efforts and soul into the singing. I did. I was very loud and enthusiastic. After the first trial, the teacher called a few other kids and me away. She told us that we must sing silently to keep good collective work. Still, she emphasized, we must put all our efforts and soul into pretending that we were singing, but we must sing silently³. We should pretend so well that even our classmates would not suspect silent singing, she said. This was an interesting new game for me. I put all my efforts and soul into my silent singing. And the singing teacher rewarded me with a 5 (an “A”) after each class. I liked getting my only 5s, but I missed my loud singing. In my before-school past, adults had appreciated my singing a lot. I usually stood on a chair and sang as loud as possible

³ See the Hungarian short 2017 movie *Sing (Mindenki)* where a similar pedagogical practice is portrayed and problematized: <http://www.singshortfilm.com/>.

with all my lungs and soul. Later, when I grew up, I learned from my parents that a big part of the audience's enjoyment was my distortion of the song words that I could not comprehend and pronounce correctly.

When my mom came home from her work, she asked me about my grades. I joyfully reported three 2s ("F") – for reading, writing, and arithmetic (because I could not read the math problem) – and one 5 ("A") for singing. Pretty good! Three beautiful red swans in one day! My mom was hysterical at my "optimism bordering on idiotism." My mom was crying, exclaiming why I was not ashamed of bad grades like all other kids. She always referred to my older brother, who once buried his grade record book ("dnevnik") in the yard to hide getting bad grades (a neighbor found it and gave it to my parents). Mom said that it was bad what my older brother did, but she said it was more understandable than me being happy about getting bad grades. I could not understand how my mom could not see the natural beauty of my teacher's red swans. Why was she so upset?

However, I was happy – I loved my whimsical magic school very much, despite its great efforts to cause a lot of pain in me to domesticate me to its institutional demands. On Sundays, when the school was closed, I often asked my parents: "What do you think 'ours' [students] are doing now?" My parents replied that it was Sunday – the school was closed. "I know that," replied I, "but what would they have been doing at this time if it hadn't been Sunday?" I was looking forward to going to school (E. Matusov, 2018).

The phrase "optimism bordering on idiotism" was coined by my aunt Yera (my dad's brother's wife), who was a school principal. She also called me "a cheerful freak" and professionally recommended my parents place me in a special school for children with mental problems. My beloved first-grade teacher suggested that as well, independently of my aunt's professional advice. The school principal put me on probation, but my parents hid this truth from me back then.

My parents protected me. My dad appreciated my wits, multiple interests, imagination, playfulness, fantasy, optimism, and enthusiasm for life. I think it resonated with my dad's own romantic life attitudes (E. Matusov, 2020b; L. Matusov, 2006), although he was never a system crusher himself as far as I know. My mom was much more ambivalent than my dad, but she was protective as well. Being a system crusher (even beyond school), I often got them in trouble. Still, as far as I can remember, they were patient with me and primarily focused on protecting me and repairing the damage caused by my cheerful life rather than on punishing me.

In the early summer of 1967, just before I entered my first grade, the six-day Arab-Israeli war started in the Middle East. Being Soviet Jews (I did not know that we were Jews back then), my parents quietly discussed the worrisome political and military development because the USSR sided with the Arab states against Israel. Although my parents tried to be discrete in their political discussions in my presence, I could hear about "Arabs" and "the Suez Canal." Based on my parents' disapproving tone, I sensed that "Arabs" were against the "Ours." In my seven-year-old mind, embedded in numerous Soviet movies about WWII that I was constantly watching on the TV, I had heard the troublesome news that "the Arabs took over the Soviet Canal [i.e., the Suez Canal]." I did not know who the Arabs were, but I had no doubts that they were some version of the Nazi Germans who invaded the USSR in the past. We lived at the end of Moscow, a few blocks from the Khimki Canal. Ah, that was obviously the canal that my parents worried about! I did not hear "Suez Canal" – I heard "Soviet Canal⁴." The Khimki Canal was the only Soviet canal I had known back then.

I rushed to our courtyard to announce the exciting news that the Arabs had taken over the Soviet Khimki Canal. Some kids were skeptical, but I told them that I had heard the news myself from my parents.

⁴ In Russian, Suez Canal and Soviet Canal sound very similar: "Suyetskiy kanal" vs. "Sovetskiy kanal."

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Many of my buddies wanted to go to see the war by themselves, and, despite our parents' strict rule against doing that, we all went to see the battle for the Soviet Canal located about ten blocks from the courtyard. To our big surprise, the beaches of the Khimki Canal were very peaceful. There were no warships on the canal. We were disappointed.

The three large five-story buildings constituting our courtyard belonged to a military jetfighter building plant where my dad and mom worked. Thus, all the kids' parents were my parents' co-workers. The kids' news about "the Arabs attacking the Soviet Canal" spread quickly at their work – people mostly laughed. However, it was potentially dangerous for my parents. The Soviet Union politically sided with the Arab states against Israel. My dad was a true-believer Communist and a leader of the local Communist organization at his work. In a lesser "politically vegetarian" time, like the Stalinist USSR, when my parents grew up, it might have cost him a job or even freedom. My parents were embarrassed by the whole debacle I created, but they did not tell me anything and instead tried to be more discrete during their political discussions at home in my presence.

A year later, in my second grade, when we moved to another district of Moscow, and I got my own room, not shared with my older brother, one of my first responses to having a separate room of my own was to create a Lenin Museum by cutting pages with his picture from a children's book about young Lenin and gluing these pages on the newly fixed wallpaper of my room. I fantasized about having a schedule when my classmates would visit my little Museum of Young Lenin – of course, the entrance to the Lenin Museum would be free. Despite their apparent disappointment of my ruining freshly fixed wallpaper with glue, my parents did not scold or punish me but patiently and tactfully explained that although my worshiping of Grandpa Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Union, was admirable, only the Communist Party could sanction Lenin museums. They took all the pages down carefully from the wallpaper and rearranged the furniture in my room to cover the damage left by the glue until they replaced the wallpaper a few years later. My dad told me that nobody could establish such a thing as a Lenin Museum without the Communist Party's authorization. It surprised me – why not?! (E. Matusov, 2018).

Looking back, I have noticed that many of my friends were marginal kids: ethnically marginal, behaviorally marginal, and mentally marginal. Other kids and adults established their marginality – I did not notice it myself. My mom was concerned about the fact that I had "freak friends," but my dad was not concerned about that at all, as far as I remember. My friendship with those kids was not exclusive as some of my friends were very popular kids as well – I was some kind of a mediator for the marginal kids and regular kids.

In our courtyard, one of my friends was "a gentle giant," Vitya Lalykin, and this was how I referred to him. He was two years older than me and much bigger. Adults and some kids called him "oligophren," a word I did not understand but knew that it meant something bad. They were mean to him. Gentle Giant Vitya did not fight back and only cried when other kids' abuse became unbearable. I was his only friend and engaged him in playing with my other friends and their friends. His mom appreciated our friendship and invited me to their apartment. She gave me very tasty food and small gifts. Vitya's older brother often offered physical protection to me in the courtyard. He attended the same class as my older brother, but they weren't friends. Being backed up by two much older boys for protection gave me solid weight in our courtyard. I protected Gentle Giant Vitya from children's (and, at times, adults') abuses as much as I could, occasionally using the protection of my older brother and Vitya's brother. "I don't understand how you can play with this feeble-minded boy. What can you have in common?" – my mom often complained. Vitya's responses to my play moves or stories were unpredictable and unusual, which sparked my imagination. For example, when I was leading the kids to the Khimki Canal to see the battle between the "ours" and the "Arabs," Gentle Giant Vitya asked all of us which side we would join in the battle. We laughed at his naïve question – the

answer was obvious for us: of course, the side of the “ours,” the Soviet side. But we appreciated his question because he made us feel mature and wise. It was always exciting and fun for me to be around him. Also, he was spectacularly generous. If he sensed that I liked any of his possessions, he immediately gave them to me as a gift “forever.” He also sensed when I was upset and hugged me gently. He cried when I cried; he laughed when I laughed – in empathy. At times, probably being overwhelmed by the meanness of other kids directed at Gentle Giant Vitya, I also became mean to him. He looked at me with such a surprise and tried to hug me. When I rejected and laughed at his hugs in disdain, he started bitterly crying. I felt ashamed. I hugged him and apologized. He smiled through his tears as if the sun appeared through rainy clouds. When he was not disturbed or abused by others, he was always cheerful – “a cheerful freak” like me.

I had a special position in the local gang of multi-age kids of both genders from our courtyard. Being an undiagnosed dyslexic (nobody heard about dyslexia back then), I was a “talented” improvisational story- and joke-teller (including sexual and vulgar ones), modifying TV movies, jokes, and stories I heard and watched. I could make a good laugh out of my lads (cf. Willis, 1981) and be valued and respected for that. I added my own situational “wisdom” and morals regarding the current events that were important for my audience and creatively played with intonations. I was also a very good player as a “German Nazi soldier” when we played in WWII – a very popular boy game of my days – because I could speak “German” fluently – i.e., I could produce unintelligent “German”-sounding gibberish in an aggressive tone. However, I was not happy about this role because, at the end of any WWII game, I would be half-playfully, half-seriously beaten as a German Nazi soldier. When I protested to play a German soldier – I wanted to play a Russian Soviet soldier, the most desirable play role – my peers refused, arguing that I spoke “perfect German.” They also mentioned that I could abuse them, as Russian Soviet soldiers at the beginning of each play when the Germans were winning over the Russians in WWII (which was a dangerous and stupid move because I would be three times more beaten by them in revenge, at the end of the play). I was physically weaker than my peers of my age, and my “talents” were my protection from my peers’ abuse (E. Matusov, 2018).

In my first grade, I immediately became friends with an unpopular boy, Sasha Bublikov, who was chubby. Being raised at home and not attending kindergarten, he did not know how to act and talk well around other kids. He was unfamiliar with children’s working-class culture. He was a foreigner in his own land. For example, he did not understand vulgar, sexualized, taboo language or even the fact that, for kids, it was taboo to use it publicly. One of the favorite abuses by other kids (mostly boys) was to ask him to repeat bad words like “pussy,” “dick,” or “fuck” in the presence of a teacher or his grandma who picked him up from school. He would repeat it, and the kids would drop dead laughing. Sasha was slow in his movements, and, as a result, our class was often punished because we could not accomplish a task assigned by the teacher as quickly as the teacher expected it from us. One time, to “give us a lesson,” the teacher punished the whole class by taking away our recess. My classmates, boys and girls, decided to beat Sasha up after school “to teach him a lesson” – the lesson that the teacher passed on to us. I managed to diffuse the situation by suggesting going to watch a cartoon in a local cinema theater, which got me into trouble with some parents, including Sasha’s grandma, who could not find their kid after school.

My school fantasies were mixed with the reality. Thus, I remember that in the first grade, my classmate friend, Olya Ugol’kova, and I were on rotating duty to clean our classroom – a typical practice of the Soviet schools back then. We decided to surprise our beloved teacher and our classmates by cleaning our classroom in such a way that “cleanness would shine.” We took all the rubbish from the desks: dirty pieces of paper, cores of an apple, old cookies, socks, etc., on the classroom floor. Then we brought buckets of water and spread the water on the floor. It was in our imagination how deep cleaning must look like. We kept fantasizing about how much our classmates, teacher, school principal, and parents would appreciate our work. Our parents found us at 9 pm in a very messy classroom. We were still in the first stage of our cleaning! Somehow, we still did not pass this stage, despite the time it took us to extract the

existing dirt and rubbish from all the desks before cleaning it off the floor. Olya and I spent more time dreaming about how our teacher and peers would appreciate our job than in actual cleaning. Our anxious, upset, and tired parents quickly cleaned the mess we created and escorted us home. Nobody praised our “community work” or even noticed it. My parents were visibly upset but happy that they finally found me.

My best friend in the first grade, Andryusha Kamensky, a friend from kindergarten, went to the school library, and I followed him. Andryusha was a fluent and passionate reader – another important source for my stories. While he was searching for interesting books to borrow, I was browsing over books with fascinating pictures. I could not read because of dyslexia, but back then, nobody had heard of dyslexia in the USSR. When Andryusha was checking out his book, the librarian asked me if I had my library card. I did not – she made a card for me. I was very proud. The librarian asked me: “Where are your books to check out?” Wow, I did not realize that with the library card, I had to borrow books. It made it even more fun. I selected 12 softcover picture books. The books had extensive texts as well, but I chose them because of their interesting pictures that inspired my imagination and fantasy. I brought the books home. My parents were pleasantly shocked: “Wow, you have started reading books by yourself! We must celebrate!”

Before that moment, “reading” was a kind of torture for me. It looked like the following scene. My mom, dad, and seven-year-old me were sitting around a family-room table and taking turns to “read” aloud the fairytale “Puss in Boots.” My mom and dad would read a page while I had to read one paragraph – the shortest one on the page. I loved stories and storytelling, but I hated this torture of “guided reading” (I was reading in Russian, my native language, this is a compatible translation):

My mom: Dear, with what letter does this word start?

Me (nailing the letter “H” with my index finger): “Aich.”

My mom: Good. Here, it reads as “kh”. And the following letter? What’s its sound?

Me (I’m thinking, how does mom know that this time it reads like “kh”?! Strange. Moving my finger to the letter “a”): “Ai.”

My dad: Hmmm, “æ.”

Me (focusing on the letter “a,” thinking: “Why ‘æ’? – how does dad know that? But whatever.”): “æ.”

My dad: So, what will that be like together?

Me: “Aichai?”

My dad: No, remember it is “kh” and “æ”. What will it be together?

Me: “Khæ”.

My mom: Good, sweaty. And the last letter? How does it sound?

Me (shifting my finger to “t”): “Ti.”

My dad corrected me: “t.” And what you will get when you put them together? Add together “kh”, “æ”, and “t”. What will you get?

Me (with a great effort): “Kh,” “æ,” and “t”... – together is... “coat.”

My dad exploded: Where do you see “coat”?!!! “Kh”, “æ”, and “t” together, is “HAT”! Not “COAT”!

My mom (hysterically): He’s mocking us!

I look at them with puzzlement. What makes them so angry? Back then, I suspected that people lied to me that they could read “texts.” They just memorized stories so well that they could point at the correct “word” – a combination of meaningless, alien symbols. It was all pretense. I just had a bad memory, so I could not do what they could do (E. Matusov, 2021b).

Like my parents, I was sitting in the living room with one of the books that I brought from the school library: “reading” it. I knew the behavior of “silent reading” rather well. A “reader” must concentrate on a page for some time, moving a finger or gaze over the text and then move to the next page and so on. It

was a rather boring activity, in my view. However, with my picture books, it was fun because I tried to create a story based on the pictures in the book. Often, the following picture completely disrupted my emergent, improvisational story, making it silly or very challenging. Such a picture reading was eventful and exciting! I really appreciated a stroke of inspiration when the new picture created an interesting twist in my story. I could return to the book I had already “read” – it was fun to create a new story with the same pictures. Also, I could decode the titles of the books with the help of the librarian who read the titles, and I remembered them. Of course, I shared my “readings” with kids in my yard and at school. The kids appreciated my stories.

Once in a while, when I had just finished one picture book and was ready to pick up another book, my mom asked me what the book was about. I was happy to tell my improvisational story based on the book pictures and the title of the book to my mom. She was pleased because I was a good storyteller, and the book was unfamiliar to her. That went all well for a while. Until... she recognized the story of the book: “The Soldier’s Porridge.” Although my improvisational pictures-based story of the soldier outsmarting a bad witch (Baba Yaga) followed the archetype of this classical fairytale⁵, the details were drastically different from the story she knew. She came to me and picked up the book. Gotcha! My mom got me. She smiled at my ingenuity. My older brother approved of my cheating reading wits with his laugh.

My school was unusual, specializing in teaching French from the first grade on. I liked the French lessons. We were asked to bring small mirrors for the lessons. We watched the mirror when we pronounced new French words to see if our tongue and lips were positioned correctly. Of course, the small mirror could be used for many other things like watching kids behind me, making dancing sunspots on the classroom’s walls or peers’ faces, looking at a book picture or text in the mirror, and so on. French was a strange subject. It was unclear to me why people needed it. It is much easier to speak Russian. But it was fun. It used some Russian words, but the meaning was strangely different, often with exaggeration. For example, the Russian word “cup” (“chashka”) was “tasse” in French. The word “taz” in Russian means “basin” (in English). I was so amazed that I rushed home to share this bizarre information: that cup (chashka) is tasse (taz, basin) in French with my parents and my older brother. However, on my way home, the Russian word “taz” (basin) somehow was transformed into “miska” (“bowl” in English) in my consciousness. I guessed that a “basin” felt to me too big for a “cup” even for French. “Dad, do you know how the word ‘cup’ sounds in French?” – asked I with excitement. “How?” asked my dad. “*Miska* [bowl]!” – I exclaimed. My parents and older brother had their doubts. But I insisted: “You don’t know French! From the fact that you are older or bigger, it does not mean that you know more than I do. Our French teacher said that cup is *miska* in French!”

Teaching French in the specialized school was mostly text-based. Probably because of my dyslexia, this instruction did not work well for me, and I was sliding more and more behind most (but not all) of my classmates. The French teacher gave us a dictation of Russian words that we had to translate into French and write them down using the French (Latin) alphabet. This was beyond my skills and knowledge. To create an impression of my work during the dictation, I was trying to write the Russian words the teacher read aloud for us, using French letters. This was a fun and challenging activity for two major reasons: 1) I was not sure how to spell a Russian word in Russian, and 2) transforming Russian spelling into the Latin alphabet was not easy because many Russian letters were not represented in the Latin alphabet. For example, one word that the teacher said was “myaso” (meat, мясо in Russian Cyrillic). In French, meat is “viande,” but I did not know that. So, I spelled the Russian word as “miassoue,” which looked more like a French word to me – I had noticed that many French words had much more vowels together than Russian words. Usually, after the dictation, the teacher asked us to exchange our work with a peer for correction. I hoped that my friend Andryusha Kamensky, an A-student in French, would correct my words. However, this time, the French teacher collected our notebooks to correct by herself at home. In a few days, I got a

⁵ The Russian fairytale was based on the Grimm brothers’ story “Stone soup”: <https://collaborationsoup.com/stone-soup-story/>

zero for my work (the angry grade mark far below an “F”), and she called my parents to come to school. When they came back home from the meeting with the French teacher, they asked me how I produced the French words during the dictation. My French teacher was puzzled how I made up the words that had nothing to do with the correct French words she expected, but the total number of the words I wrote corresponded well with the number of the words she dictated. “There should be some pattern in his writing!” – she declared to my parents. When I explained to my parents how and why I did what I did, they laughed and replied that it made sense to them. They were also puzzled about why my French teacher had not asked me about that. At the same time, my parents started thinking of taking me out of the specialized French school to put me into a regular school.

Every year the school prepared a play in French for a French delegation. This year, it was “The Prince Frog.” My best school friend Andryusha Kamensky, an A-student in French, was assigned to play the Prince Frog. He was very proud and anxious. I did my best to help him to prepare. He practiced with me while I provided him with my feedback. I liked his performance, his exaggerated gestures, his funny faces, and especially his majestic frog leaps. I could not understand one word he was saying in French. At some point in his rehearsal, the Prince Frog had to make the frog sounds, “kva-kva” in Russian. I did not like it because this was a French play, and I argued that the frog sounds must also be in French like the rest of the play. Andryusha did not know how to make the frog sounds in French. That was a puzzle. I was thinking for a while and produced: “bre-ke-ke-keks⁶.” I felt it was a very Frenchy sound, suitable for a French frog. Andryusha agreed.

The school hall was full of French dignitaries, district school administrators, teachers, and students of different ages. Although student admission was very limited due to a lack of space in the school hall, as Andryusha’s closest friend, I was allowed to attend the play. I could not follow the French speech in the play, but I enjoyed the performance, especially of my friend, the Prince Frog. The costumes were magnificent. The acting was superb. I laughed together with the audience, although I did not know what exactly was funny. When the Prince Frog made the French frog sound, “bre-ke-ke-keks,” I invented, the silence broke. People looked at each other. Andryusha repeated louder, “Bre-ke-ke-keks, bre-ke-ke-keks!” I could hear a kid next to me asking quietly, “What does it mean?!” I replied proudly: “It means ‘kva-kva’ in French.” My reply spread among the kids and then the adults. People, including French adults⁷, started laughing and applauding. I felt like I was in seventh heaven.

But after the play, our French teacher called me and Andryusha and reprimanded us: “You shouldn’t listen to this 2-student [i.e., F-student]! You mustn’t deviate from the script and bring your own incomprehensible words. You spoiled the play.” Andryusha was crying. He looked angrily at me and stopped talking with me. However, later, the school principal called for Andryusha and praised him for his performance during the play. The French delegation liked the play a lot, especially the French frog sound “bre-ke-ke-kes,” which we invented. The sun came back from the clouds for both of us again.

When we moved to another apartment in another district of Moscow, and I joined my second grade in another school, my school fun was gradually gone – I got broken. I started doing all my school assignments without playing with my fantasies. I started hating my school. I did my homework obediently, trying to spend as little time on it as possible. I became ashamed of my bad grades. I obediently followed my teacher’s order to search my peer to find out if he smuggled forbidden objects (e.g., toys, colorful wires,

⁶ This neologism exists in Russian, but its meaning and origin are unclear. Some say that it refers to a magic spell, but some others mention it as a frog sound in the antique comedy by Aristophanes “The Frogs,” in a Russian translation. Apparently, I heard this word somewhere (<https://otvet.mail.ru/question/10676047>)

⁷ The frog sound in French is koah-koah (or “croa croa” written in French) <https://www.ouiinfrance.com/french-animal-sounds-with-audio/>

matches) to school. I lost the ability to be a public author of my life and became like other kids, at least in school.

But I learned how to keep a kindle of the joy of life inside of me. I learned to hide my happiness; I realized that at times and with some people, I must shield my feelings and thoughts and keep them to myself. I studied carefully the norms and expectations in order to pretend that I followed them. I discovered the underground double life of what later Soviet dissidents referred to as "internal emigration" (Wertsch, 2002). Why did this change happen to me? Did the system-induced pains finally start hurting and disciplining me? Or was it a result of my social isolation caused by the move to a new district and school? Or was it a result of my maturation? I do not know.

Coda

Comparing the ways my parents and my school responded to me as a happy system crusher, the pattern emerges. My parents often addressed my disruptions of their lives by rethinking and renegotiating their practices. A good example of such rethinking was my dad's reconsidering the physical punishment of my older brother. My dad disciplined my older brother for his "serious" misdemeanors using corporeal punishment by beating my brother with his belt, which was a common disciplining practice in the Soviet Union of those days. My brother had to pull his pants down, lay on our sofa, and my dad would beat my brother's naked butt with the belt. My brother cried and promised not to do "it" – whatever "it" might be – again. However, inadvertently, I contributed to stopping such beatings. This is how it happened.

When I was three, I went to a local furniture store located three blocks away from our house to look for a new bed for myself. I overheard my parents discussing the need to buy a new bed for me because I had outgrown the old one. I was proud of the fact that I was not a baby anymore. So, I decided to check for the bed by myself. My parents caught me on my way back. I miscalculated the time when they came back from work. My older brother, who was ten at that time, was supposed to look after me, but he was busy playing with his peers as usual. My parents looked scared. We lived in a long 5-store building along with two other similar buildings, creating the shape of the letter C around an internal courtyard where I was allowed to stay. The three buildings belonged to the plant where my father worked. So, many people living in these buildings knew each other. When my parents were looking for me, someone from my dad's work told them they saw me in the furniture store. My parents rushed there only to find the 3-year-old me walking back, with my hands in my coat pockets and looking very serious and important. I found a bed that I wanted in the furniture store. When I saw them, I knew that I had transgressed my parents' rules. I was at fault, and I expected a serious, mature punishment.

On the way back, while being scolded by my parents for leaving the courtyard without permission, I seriously asked my dad, "Are you going to beat me with your belt?" He looked at me with surprise but then answered, "Yes." I was scared and proud. My dad had never beaten me before in any way. But he beat my 10-year-old brother with his pant belt to discipline him. I felt that I was becoming a grown-up with this corporal punishment that was meant for older kids.

When we came home, I pulled down my pants and underwear and laid down on a sofa, preparing for the execution. My dad took his belt and symbolically hit me several times. I pretended to be hurt but "stoically" did not cry. After this mature discipline procedure that I took as my rite of passage, I ran to my older brother, bragging to him about my bravery and accusing him of being a sissy because he often cried after being beaten up by my dad for his transgressions. This was when I was really beaten and hurt by my older brother, only to be saved by my parents.... After this incident, my dad stopped using any corporeal discipline on my brother (and, of course, on me).

A happy system crusher at home and in conventional and democratic schools

Eugene Matusov

My sense is that around the early 1960s, something happened in the Soviet parenting culture in the intelligencia class and, especially, in the Jewish Moscow intelligencia, and the parents stopped using corporeal discipline for their misbehaving children. Some of my less-lucky peers envied me because their dads still beat them. So far, I do not know what happened around that time and why and how widespread the phenomenon of stopping corporeal punishment by Soviet intelligencia parents was. Still, this was true for some of my peers from the intelligencia families (E. Matusov, 2018). Later, my dad told me that my half-playful, half-serious request for corporeal punishment helped him reflect on “how cruel and irrational his corporeal discipline was” (his words). In general, my system crashing due to my happy life at home often caused my parents to reflect and rethink their parental practices, values, priorities, and attitudes, regardless of how inconvenient, uncomfortable, or even dangerous it might be to harbor and protect my happy life that they appreciated.

I was a happy system crusher at home, before school, in my kindergarten, and in my school. However, only the school blamed me for being happy (cf. McDermott & Varenne, 1998).

In contrast, the school responded to my happy lifeful system crashing completely differently. At best, the school responded by ignoring me or, at worst, by punishing me, intentionally causing pain, and suppressing me. The conventional school system prioritized its smooth, uneventful functioning over addressing my interests, needs, and life, which did not fit in. The school tried to normalize me, to make me non-problematic. When my happy life disrupted their machine-like functioning, the system tried to discipline me. There was no reflection of itself, its own practices, priorities, and values.

Why is that? I hypothesize that one of the major problems of conventional school is that it does not serve the interests of its students, mostly serving the disciplinary society (i.e., the government and the institutions) to mold children into convenient citizens at the expense of the student’s authorial agency (E. Matusov, 2024, submitted; Stirner, 1963). The conventional school tries to domesticate children in order to make them convenient and useful for society, whose agent is the school institution, transforming “wild” students into “educated subjects” (Fendler, 1998; Foucault, 1995). Conventional schools do not accept teachers’ *fiduciary duty* toward the students, where teachers serve their students’ educational goals (E. Matusov, 2022). Let me quote Aleksey Arestovich, a Ukrainian psychologist, philosopher, soldier, and (former) advisor of the Office of the Ukrainian President Zelensky:

Our culture is a culture of colossal neurosis, sometimes passing over into psychosis. Why? Did you observe children at six years old and then at seven? They are entirely different because they come out of the first class being already very well-trained and well-disciplined. Instead of being joyful six-year-olds who run around and have fun, after the first grade, they become such obedient bunnies, able to sit quietly on their little butts for 45 minutes, which for them is an absolutely unnatural story. Because hundreds of iron sticks have already been broken on them in order to make them, as Professor Preobrazhensky⁸ said, “socially acceptable members of society.” This is done by roughly clipping their wings with coarse garden clippers, by breaking off those individual features that stick out of them so inconveniently for society that could have made us unique creative authors of our lives (Arestovich, August 9, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUPIF7_rSCM, translation from Russian is mine).

Finally, I want to consider the issue of how a school should look, in which happy system crushers would blossom and where students’ wings would be nurtured and valued rather than clipped (cf. E. Matusov, 2017). Arestovich’s quote gives some guidance. Such a school must treat all its students as system crushers! Not as cogs of any system but as unique people who author their unique lives. The primary

⁸ It is the reference to famous Soviet writer Mikhail Bulgakov’s character in his fictional short story “The Dog’s Heart.”

goal of such a school is not to load the student with preset knowledge, values, skills, and attitudes and to make convenient, useful, obedient citizens but to help the student find themselves, their own unique voices, and develop their wings. Dialogic education can help in this process by providing educatees with dialogues where their unique voices and authorship might develop further (E. Matusov, 2009). The system, if it is needed at all, must support these processes rather than suppress or hijack them.

Do I know such schools? Yes! There are democratic schools like Summerhill (Neill, 1960), Sudbury Valley School (Greenberg, 1991), The Circle School (Rietmulder, 2019), etc. In such democratic schools, children choose whether to study or not, what to study, for what purpose, when and with whom, and so on. They have an extensive zone of personal freedoms limited by their democratic self-governance. Democratic schools do not force children to become “obedient bunnies.” Still, as reported by democratic educators, even these schools could not tolerate all system crushers, whom they are forced to expel at their democratic gatherings. Usually, this happens very rarely, and based on the published descriptions, those system crushers are not happy system crushers like me. I wonder if universal and unconditional acceptance of system crushers is ever possible.

Interview with Jim Rietmulder, a founder of The Circle School, about system crushers in his democratic school

Eugene: How do system crushers feel at TCS [The Circle School]?

Jim: So, at The Circle School... Well, I'm sure there are many system crashings that I don't notice -- happy, disturbed, mischievous, angry, independent. Importantly, I suppose I don't NEED to notice them. I think most system crashing here is accommodated by informal and formal processes that are “built in.” To the degree that a system accommodates system crashing, is it really system crashing at all? Some actions that would crash other systems are routine here and don't crash the system.

Eugene: It makes sense to me because TCS not only has many feedback loops for all, not only the students but also prides itself on serving the students.

Jim: Limiting my thoughts to academic classes (which, as you know, happens when students ask)... Suppose a student is taking a class and, say, fails to do the homework assigned by the teacher or does it “creatively” in the way of some of your stories. If it's a one-on-one class, maybe the student and teacher acknowledge the creativity together and then move on or do the homework together, or maybe the teacher will suggest taking class time to do the work while the teacher moves on to some other activity. If it's a group of students, then maybe the class will proceed, and the “crasher” just won't get whatever benefit they might have derived from the homework. If the class group was counting on the crusher to deliver a report or otherwise facilitate the class progress, then the outcome might be that the crusher feels regret or embarrassment by the disappointment thus caused, or they might feel nothing in particular. In any case, though, the teacher is not held responsible for the student's learning, so the teacher has no need to chastise, disapprove, or compel the student.

A wise educator 😊 recently wrote “the teacher's pedagogical fiduciary duty to their student is to recognize and respect that the student is the final authority for their own education and life” (E. Matusov, 2022). If teachers did their [professional fiduciary] duty, much system crashing would pass without recognition as such.

Eugene: What kinds of system crushers exist at TCS? Happy? Disturbed? Some other types? How would you define them?

Jim: As you may know, the JC [Judicial Committee, consisting of TCS students of various ages and staff that deals with TCS participants' violation of the school rules] each day has two appointed “runners” to go get witnesses. Sometimes a young student serving as a runner is seen actually running through the building – because they think that runners are supposed to run. :-) That's a happy crusher. When it

comes to light, the JC Chair or someone else explains that we call it “runner” but don’t really mean what that word implies.

[As to “disturbed” or other system crashers,] in the 1980s or early 90s we expelled a student for shoplifting during a school field trip. Twice or more, we have expelled students who simply weren’t attending school regularly. Expelling such students was deemed to protect the school from adverse action by authorities – prioritizing institutional survival. These were not “happy” crashers and not “disturbed” in the sense of your stories. I don’t know what to call them.

Eugene: I wonder if you might call them “irresponsible” system crashers. I wonder how they saw themselves. Do you remember how they justified their actions?

Jim: I think they felt oppressed in the [conventional] schools they came from, and then held onto their alienation when they came to The Circle School. Subversion and alienation had become part of their identity and change is hard. It's why we don't automatically admit kids who are over 16 years old – there's not enough time left in their school career to detoxify and reboot, to develop a new identity.

And they didn't try to justify their actions. I think they just accepted that they were caught doing something the System didn't allow – a System that they didn't care about.

Eugene: In my view, they are system crashers because they disrupted the school practices and relationships, and the school could not accommodate them. Whether they were “happy system crashers” depends on how they perceived the situation of their “disruption” – it is an interesting question of who disrupted whom.

By the way, as a happy system crasher, I did not feel that school disrupted me. I was just surprised at why so many people, mostly adults, were suddenly mad at me.

Jim: I think we have also expelled a few students after accumulating a long history of rule infractions when it seems there’s open defiance and refusal to change, or there’s no progress towards acceptable patterns.

Eugene: “Acceptable patterns” – accepted by whom? Maybe not by them. I wonder if you consider changing or at least problematizing these “acceptable patterns”? Do you remember specific examples?

Jim: Specifics: physically striking; physically striking other kids; yelling obscenities; refusing to appear before the Judicial Committee; sometimes property damage. You ask “by whom”... by some combination of adult judgment, weighing values and harms (to the subject individual and to others and also to the school as an institution), and usually the vote of School Meeting, usually substantially influenced by adult judgments.

Occasionally we have “soft-expelled” a student diagnosed with ASD [i.e., “Autism Spectrum Disorder”] whose eruptions and disruptions imposed greatly on others and also made it unlikely they would thrive here. Were they “happy” crashers? I don’t know.

I don’t think we’ve ever expelled a “happy” system crasher, even for a long history of rule infractions, unless it appears that there’s harm to the crasher or some unacceptable imposition on others.

Eugene: I suspect that Little Eugene would have been mostly happy at TCS. One possibility for tension could have been clean-up time – I might play with cleaning instead of effective cleaning out of super good intentions (read the cleaning example in above). I remember living a playful, fairytale-like life (sorry for the tautology) full of magic adventures, which had nothing to do with efficiency or expediency. If Little Eugene had been at TCS, I might have enthusiastically volunteered to do many assignments, but I might have upset others because my ways of doing things would not have been very good despite my good intentions and even efforts. I loved to help others. Do you remember having kids like that? If so, what was the school’s response to them?

Jim: A young child with a mind full of “magic adventures” is not really a problem. That child might be part of the playroom cleanup team. Their teammates might mostly ignore or tolerate it, or be part of it, or cajole

and demand. More of a problem is chore refusal or shirking -- which is more common than anyone wants to admit out loud. :-) The Chore Committee finds accommodations – a special chore or a designated time, or just a bit of slack for someone whose personality, capacity, or quirks make it easier to accommodate than to fight.

Eugene: Do you think there can be a democratic school that can nicely incorporate all kids without any expulsion? If not, why not? If so, what does this democratic school look like?

Jim: I think several factors would make it difficult for The Circle School (here in Pennsylvania in 2023) to accept all kids and never expel any: government regulation (can't violate laws, such as student attendance), market reception (gotta have paying customers), scale (gotta be a large enough population to integrate extremes while accommodating normals), and resources (for accommodating extremes).

Jim's last response made me think that the ideal of a democratic school or any collective enterprise, educational or otherwise, for that matter, without "hard" and "soft, self-" exclusions might be harmful. I think that a no-fault and fault divorce should be expected to avoid violence and abuse. At any time, the participants can feel imprisoned by school settings that do not work for them anymore (or at all). After crashing too much or too badly, not being able to cope with these system crashes, – when mutual accommodations do not work – expulsion or voluntary leaving the democratic school can be a good option. People are unique and not totally malleable. Each institutional setting and each collective are specific. It might work beautifully for some participants but ugly for others. Search for the Holy Grail of an institution or a collective setting that works well for all without crashing can be a disastrous utopia. Normalization of a no-fault or fault divorce might be a better alternative.

(Happy) system crashers in Eugene's democratic dialogic higher ed classrooms

The discussion of a happy system crasher at home, in conventional and democratic schools, led me to think about my own university teaching, where I try to practice democratic dialogic education (E. Matusov, 2015, 2020a, 2022, 2023). I teach diverse educational classes to undergraduate students, most of whom are preservice elementary school teachers, and to doctoral graduate students, most of whom will be educational researchers.

I came to Democratic Education from Dialogic Education that I have tried to practice at the higher education level in the USA since 1994. I believed that genuine dialogue was not possible without my students' freedom to define and change the topic of the classroom dialogue. Gradually, I realized that "genuine dialogue" demands other freedoms for my students as well: freedom to be silent, freedom to choose what to study, freedom of voice, freedom of the classroom collective organization, freedom of attendance, freedom of defining their own pedagogical regime, freedom not to study, freedom from my impositions, freedom not to study from me, and so on. In other words, I have realized that "genuine dialogue" is mostly possible among free people: dialogue requires democracy.

Have I experienced happy system crashers in my democratic dialogic high ed classrooms? Yes, I think so. One of the most vivid examples occurred in the mid-2000s in one of my undergraduate multicultural courses for future teachers⁹. This was before I was providing my students with a choice of pedagogical regimes (see below). In one of my past undergraduate classes, I had a student, a future teacher, who was disengaged in my class on cultural diversity in education despite all my diverse pedagogical approaches to engage her and despite her own public pronouncements in the class that she wanted to learn to be a good teacher. Back then, I was a Progressive Education teacher who tried to find "a key to the heart and mind" for each and every student of mine in order to engage them in each and every curricular topic I taught (E.

⁹ This case was first published elsewhere (E. Matusov, 2021b).

Matusov, 2021a). For example, during our practicum at a local community center, I used to send little children to her to ask for help with their playful activities. Still, this student rejected those children – she continued texting on her smartphone or distracting her peers working with children. Despite all my efforts, she remained disengaged and got a C+, which was a rather unusually low-grade mark for my classes back then.

To my big surprise, a year later, while bumping into each other on the campus, this student was happy to see me. She admitted that our class was the best thing that happened to her at the university. “How come?!” I asked, perplexed: why would she like my class when she was disengaged and got a low final grade?! Was she an educational masochist (E. Matusov & Sullivan, 2020)? No. She explained that in my class and through my efforts to engage her in studies and in working with kids, and through her negative, disengaged response to that, she painfully realized that she did not want to be a teacher. Instead, she changed her major to acting, and she felt happy there. She concluded that it was important for her to listen to herself rather than always force herself to engage in educational studies. She was surprised by her disengaged response to the class that she freely chose and was looking forward to. Giving up teacher education was the best learning she experienced. She reported that she was happy in our class because I did not “push” her, letting her freely and safely experience and live through her disengagement and reflect on her feelings about that. In the previous classes, she reported to me that she was forced to study by her teachers, and she studied well despite her perceived revulsion. She attributed this revulsion to her normal response to being forced to study. However, in our class, the teacher pressure was greatly reduced (but not entirely, in my judgment), but her revulsion was not. She told me that she noticed the enthusiasm of her peers. It puzzled her why she was missing this enthusiasm.

Before meeting her on the campus a year after our class, I thought that I had failed this student because, as a progressive teacher, I could not find a key to her heart and mind, and she did not learn much from my class. However, I was wrong. In her case, the lack of the student’s study activism, engagement, and motivation aimed at becoming a good teacher, despite her own learning desire, – was, in fact, educational in itself because she, the learner, came to appreciate it. She learned from her study disengagement that she did not want to be a teacher.

As her teacher, after this meeting and my reflection on it, I learned that my pedagogical role was not always to engage my students in the studies in my classes – even if they had chosen these studies – but, importantly, also to help my students test their motivation and commitment to their future profession. The lack of motivation and commitment might be an important sign that their initial educational desire and professional aspiration might be wrong. The presence of education is defined by the value the learner attributes to their learning. If this value is negative or neutral, the underlying learning is not educational for the learner (a neutral value), or it can even be anti-educational (a negative value). Only when the learner attributes a positive value to their learning does the learning become educational for the learner (E. Matusov, 2021b). For the student I described above, the value of her learning disengagement apparently changed from seeing herself as “a poor, unmotivated, preservice teacher” (as she told me) to find her own calling as a future actress. Her subjective attitude to her learning disengagement has changed. In our class, initially, she saw her disengagement with the class studies and children – her learning how not to engage despite my pedagogical efforts – negatively. She had learned that she was a bad student of teaching. However, sometime later, she started seeing this disengagement positively as a sign that teaching was not her vocation. She had learned that acting and not teaching was her vocation. Upon her reflection, her learning disagreement changed from being anti-educational to becoming educational.

Looking back, I perceived this student as a happy system crusher. She disrupted my teaching and her peers’ learning in class and, especially at the practicum, by distracting them and me. She was constantly

my pedagogical headache as I was searching for the pedagogical key to her heart and mind. Meanwhile, she was happy and relaxed, having “an alienation vacation” (E. Matusov & Brobst, 2013). She said that she enjoyed listening to our interesting and profound classroom dialogic discussions and socializing with her peers and me in the classroom and at the afterschool center. She said that she liked to be among enthusiastic and dedicated people even though she did not share this enthusiasm and dedication. As she told me, her unhappiness mainly came at the end of the class, at the time of grading, when she realized that she was a “bad student.” The only pain I gave her was the C+ final grade, which she accepted as a “deserving” grade because she did not fulfill all the assignments that I designed for and imposed on my students. She was unhappy with herself. Of course, now I regret giving her final grade pain for two major reasons: 1) her experience in our class was super educational, and 2) I have realized the antieducational functions of grades and the summative assessment in general (E. Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, & Meacham, 2016). In sum, my dialogic, but not very democratic, classroom worked for this happy system crusher but barely, and not because of my conscious efforts to accommodate her.

In another example of a happy system crusher, I, as a democratic dialogic teacher, was much more proactive in addressing this phenomenon¹⁰. For the first time, I am teaching an undergraduate course, “Topics in Education,” for education major and minor seniors. For most of them, it is their last semester before graduation. Many of them were in the process of looking for a job during this semester. Some had teaching practicum.

Before the class started, I developed a Curriculum Map of 11 topics I expected the students to be interested in discussing. By then, in the middle of the 15-week semester, the students added ten more topics they were interested in studying. The class had the following four pedagogical regimes to choose from by week 6 of the semester (the grace period):

- 1) Open Syllabus for “self-responsible learners,” where students could make all decisions about their own education: what to study, how, class attendance, grading, and so on.
- 2) Opening Syllabus for “other-responsible learners,” where I made the initial decisions about the organization of the class and then gradually transferred responsibility to the students. In this pedagogical regime, I pushed the students to study via mandatory assignments, points, and final grades. That was the default pedagogical regime at the beginning of the semester from which the students could switch.
- 3) Non-traditional Closed Syllabus for credential students who just want to be certified by passing exams and getting the final grade, similar to receiving a driver’s license.
- 4) Non-Syllabus for “prisoners of education,” i.e., students who were forced to take this class by the university but felt that the class was unnecessary and painful. They were given a grade of their wish and said “goodbye” to avoid education being a “cruel and unusual punishment” for them (E. Matusov, 2021c).

Lejan (pseudonym) is a Chinese international student who has attended only the first class meeting so far (we are in the middle of the semester now). She is a marketing major and an education minor. When the grace period passed, her pedagogical regime, the Opening Syllabus, remained the default, but she did not sign it. Only after the grace period for choosing the pedagogical regime expired did she ask me via email to meet to discuss what she should study.

Lejan asked me to switch to Open Syllabus, and she said she did not know (forgot? did not pay attention?) about the grace period, which passed two weeks ago. She also asked me to help her to choose what she should study “for the class.” Her wording “for the class” bothered me because it suggested to me that Lejan was not “a self-responsible learner,” as the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime indicated to me

¹⁰ This case was first published elsewhere (E. Matusov, 2022).

unless it was a wrong choice of her words. I asked her why she wanted the Open Syllabus. She replied that she was busy searching for a computer programming job in China (not in marketing, not in education) as she is moving back there in June after she graduated from the university. Also, she told me that she had lost her interest in education (and marketing), but she was ready to do her “*job for the class*” – this wording made me cringe because I felt it revealed her commitment to pleasing me and my imposed assignments, rather than her own educational desires if she had ones. I asked her why she was not considering switching to the Prisoner of Education pedagogical regime and just got an A without doing anything “for the class.” I reasoned aloud that since she had lost her interest in education, she did not need this class, and it might feel like an unnecessary burden (she nodded). Why not choose this option and get out of the course at once?

To my surprise, Lejan replied that she saw herself as “a self-responsible learner” (the wording of the Open Syllabus). That is why she wanted to choose some topics to study in our class. Then, she added, “I want to study... but just not education.” I asked what it would be. Lejan said that she was actually using our course time to study Python, a computer programming language. She asked a computer science professor to audit his course and lab sessions, and he agreed. She said that in the ideal world, she would switch from her minor in education and her major in marketing to a major in computer programming. But it was too late to do it institution-wise.

I did not know what to do. I hesitated at first... and then I surprised myself by suggesting to her to make her Open Syllabus about studying Python. Her response was unexpected to me. She jumped and hugged me. I saw tears in her eyes while she was smiling. She exclaimed, “Really?! You can’t imagine how much happy you made me! I was studying Python, day and night, but our class constantly bothered me.” I told her that, although I have an MS in computer science, I did not know Python, and I could not help her to learn it. She replied that she was OK because she was using other resources to study Python at the university.

She asked me why I was so different than other professors and how I came to this decision. I explained that the most important thing for me was my students’ education as defined by my students. Computer programming and specifically studying Python became her education now, and that was what mattered to me. However, I told her that if we had met several years ago, my response would be different – more like other professors. Also, my actions pleasantly surprised me as well because I had not thought about these issues before.

Although my proposal to Lejan was a surprise not only to her but to me too, so far, I like it. I remember when I interviewed Nikolai Konstantinov, a founder of democratic math education in the USSR; he told me a similar thing: genuine education is not defined by an academic subject but by helping people “fly” – i.e., being able to author their education and life (E. Matusov, 2017). I think it was “the final exam” for me as a democratic teacher. I passed it... but with hesitation. I wonder if this hesitation reflects the residue of me being colonized by Progressive Education. A Progressive teacher strives to fascinate all students with the subject they teach (E. Matusov, 2021a).

At the end of the semester, Lejan submitted her Open Syllabus about studying Python on our class web. She also sent me the printout of a cat using her Python “*cat pikachu.py*” program.

Lejan engaged in figuring out what was best for her education. By offering her different options and going through them, I helped Lejan make up her mind to legitimately use the course time and reflection resources to study the computer language Python. I reconfirmed to Lejan that she was truly a self-responsible learner.

It was interesting that Lejan found the development of her Open Syllabus focusing on studying Python useful for her, as she told me in her email later on. She wrote that it helped her to think through the Python topics she wanted to study that semester and kept her organized. Planning the curricular topics and how she would study them made her a better autodidact than she was before. Also, she mentioned that she deviated from her plan, which she considered to be OK (and I agree – I wrote in the guidelines to the Open Syllabus design that it should not be viewed as “a learning contract” but rather as the beginning of the unpredictable learning journey).

Lejan crashed my “system,” but I was happy about that because it made it a bit more democratic. It also revealed my role as “a benevolent dictator” in the classroom because the change happened via my autocratic rethinking of the system rather than via a democratic process (E. Matusov, 2023). I wonder how much of what happened between Lejan and me was structured by the oppressive nature of the foisted higher education institution we both were part of. Without the educational bureaucracy aiming at credentialism, Lejan could freely move to study computer science without even a need to talk with me and receive my blessing.

I have noticed that I try to accommodate system crashers – happy or otherwise – in my pedagogical practice. For example, I have inbuilt the no-fault divorce for students who feel that the class, imposed by the university, is not helpful for them (Non-Syllabus for “Prisoners of Education”) or that they do not need me as their teacher or that they want to study only topics of their own interest (Open Syllabus for self-responsible learners or the Virtual Attendance in the Opening Syllabus pedagogical regime). I always accept students’ requests to change their pedagogical regime even after the grace period has passed. One may ask why to have the grace period in the first place. Because my students find it helpful for them.

Still, I have other system crashers. The most memorable disturbed system crusher was a Native American racist undergraduate student who harassed all his peers but not me or my teaching assistant. I tried to talk with him to stop his harassment, but in vain. After he expressed his pity that the teenage daughter of one of his peers did not kill herself because of her race (she tried to commit suicide), I decided to expel him from our class. However, all his peers petitioned me not to do so because, despite their pains caused by his racist harassment, they learned a great deal from him and how to deal with him (for a more detailed description of the case, see E. Matusov & Lemke, 2015, pp. E14-E15).

A few students chose the Opening Syllabus but did not fulfill its requirements, and thus, crashed the system I designed for them. Some students who have chosen Open Syllabus or Non-Syllabus do not report their desired final grades at the end of the semester – another crash of my system. What do I do in these cases? I give the students an Incomplete grade, which automatically turns into an F in a few months by the university registrar system. The latter usually forces the students to contact me and resolve the issue. Some of these system crashers inform me about hardships in their lives that caused the transgression of my class regime: physical sickness, depression, being overwhelmed with other classes, work, or romantic relationships. Most do not.

I decided to return the power of (forced) decision-making to the student. However, in the absence of the university (oppressive) credential system, these problems would probably not exist.

Conclusion

Happy system crashers are children and students in general who inadvertently disrupt the educational system by being unapologetic authors of their lives. It is much more common to hear that children must be prepared for (conventional) school than that the (conventional) school must be prepared

for diverse, if not unique, children and students. The system of conventional schooling often tries to crash happy system crushers.

However, I argue that a happy system crusher is an ideal prerequisite for becoming a participant in Democratic Education and Dialogic Education, especially if the participant freely chooses these types of education. Genuine dialogue and participation in democratic governance require authorial agency (E. Matusov, von Duyke, & Kayumova, 2016) from their participants. When a person is not interested in being an author of their own life (aka an unhappy system crusher), the person might need therapy for their psychological and/or social depression rather than education (i.e., self-education) – i.e., “alienation vacation” (E. Matusov & Brobst, 2013) or “school detoxification” (Llewellyn, 1998; Neill, 1960).

The primary role of educators and schools is to support such students’ self-education when the students ask for such support. Educators need to commit themselves to “pedagogical fiduciary duty” to their students to help them accomplish their own educational goals or form such goals (E. Matusov, 2022).

Will the educators’ commitment to pedagogical fiduciary duty eliminate or, at least, minimize the phenomenon of happy system crusher or system crusher in general? No, I do not think so. Actually, I think the reverse is true. Pedagogical fiduciary duty invites and normalizes disruptions of the system, of the given from the students. This makes education unpredictable and, thus, eventful, based on the authorial agency of the participants. Fighting system crashing and system crushers is a birthmark of conventional education and, probably, progressive education. Authorial agency always involves creative and unpredictable transcendence and, thus, disruption of the given, demanding creative recognition and response from others. System crashing is not only unavoidable but desirable and welcome. System crashing must be recognized as the bread and butter – the dramatic life – of a collective educational enterprise. System crashing is a renewal of the system, which provides the necessary skeleton for the collective educational enterprise.

However, some of these system crashes can be centrifugal, pulling the participants apart via voluntary leaving or expulsion of the participants. This also should be expected and normalized, regardless of how painful this process may be at times. The alternative to it is much worse: institutional imprisonment, violence, and abuse. Even at its extreme, the end of the entire system – the terminal system crash – can be mourned, but its preservation is not always desirable and worth pursuing.

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A happy system crusher at home and in conventional and democratic schools
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