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Against Equity: Toward a Uniqueness Model of Educational Justice

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Abstract

This conceptual paper challenges the dominance of the equity model of social justice in education by arguing that it is fundamentally anti-educational, reducing students to recipients of standardized outcomes and eroding their authorial agency and ownership of learning. Instead, the author proposes a radical alternative: the uniqueness model of educational justice, which affirms learners' rights to self-education, self-direction, and democratic self-governance. Grounded in a sociocultural approach and democratic schooling practices, this model views education as a process of personal meaning-making rather than as the standardization of learning outcomes. Through critical analysis and a richly narrated case study of the Gaga Ball Game Corporation at a democratic school, the paper illustrates how authentic education arises when students define and evaluate their own learning in dialogue with others. The uniqueness model rejects the bureaucratic, totalized educational paternalism and moral intrusiveness of equity frameworks and instead champions intrinsic motivation, learner autonomy, and diversity of educational goals. In doing so, it reframes educational justice not as sameness of outcomes but as the cultivation of human dignity through authorial learning pathways.

Keywords*: Equity, Educational justice, Uniqueness model, Democratic education, Self-education, Educational autonomy.*

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Setting the problem with the equity model of social justice

The purpose of my conceptual paper is to introduce a new model of social justice that focuses on human uniqueness and authorial agency, in response to and in a critical examination of the equity model of social justice in education. I contend that, despite its widespread acceptance in Western academia, it is fundamentally anti-educational (apart from minor cases I discussed in my paper). The equity model strives to ensure comparable educational outcomes by addressing systemic inequalities through differentiated support. However, such standardization, arguably, limits students' authorial agency, self-evaluation, and authorship in learning, ultimately undermining authentic education. I am aware that my critique of the equity model is limited and likely requires more comprehensive treatment, such as a book-length analysis. My primary goal is to introduce a new model of social justice in education, which also remains sketchy here.

The fable "Animal School" by George Reavis[1] serves as a powerful allegorical critique of the traditional, equity-based education system for the harm it inflicts on its students. In this story, animals in a forest establish a school with a standardized curriculum encompassing running, climbing, swimming, and flying. Each animal is required to complete every subject, regardless of its inherent abilities or preferences. For instance, the Duck excels in swimming but is only average at flying and struggles significantly with running. Consequently, its webbed feet are injured by enforced running practice, thereby impairing its swimming proficiency. Similarly, although the Rabbit is an excellent runner, its paw spines are injured during attempts to learn to swim, thereby reducing its ability to run effectively. The Squirrel, adept at climbing, experiences frustration when forced to fly by leaping from trees and sustains injuries during swimming exercises. Furthermore, the Eagle, naturally gifted at flying, is reprimanded for employing its unique techniques rather than adhering to standard protocols. Only Coco, the Chicken, got an honorary diploma from the Animal School because Coco was equally mediocre in all the standardized learning activities required by the school.

[1] The animation of the fable can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JccLYKqm0jA

The overarching theme of the fable suggests that, despite each animal's unique talents and interests, none excelled due to the rigid educational system, which failed to accommodate individual strengths. All of them mostly learned what they are not able to do. Through this narrative, the fable highlights how standardized equity-based education systems often overlook and fail to develop learners' personal strengths, thereby stifling or damaging their potential. It underscores the necessity for educational frameworks to be adaptable and personalized, catering to the distinctive, unique strengths, interests, and needs of individual learners.

Even progressive educational models, which seek to foster creativity, critical thinking, and experiential learning, often operate within predefined learning objectives. For instance, project-based learning pedagogical initiatives may emphasize collaboration and problem-solving but still adhere to state or national standards that delineate the scope of acceptable projects. As a result, students' ability to pursue areas of intrinsic interest or develop evaluative judgment is constrained by the overarching need to meet these learning outcomes, however loosely defined by the powerful others in progressive education.

This essay advocates an alternative model of educational justice, grounded in uniqueness and emphasizing self-education, self-directed learning, personal freedom, and democratic self-governance. Drawing on sociocultural theory, democratic school practices, Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogism, and philosophical perspectives on autonomy and justice, I demonstrate how the uniqueness model respects and nurtures personal interests and needs by examining a democratic school assembly that led to the creation of the Gaga Ball Game Corporation. The paper concludes by highlighting the potential of this alternative model to foster authorial agency, creativity, and personal growth, thereby transforming educational practices toward more genuine and meaningful learning experiences.

What is the equity model of social justice for education?

The equity model of social justice has gained significant prominence in Western academic institutions and has influenced various sectors beyond academia, including subsidized housing, employment, political representation, economic development, healthcare, and others. In the field of education, this model emphasizes fairness by addressing systemic inequalities and tailoring resources and opportunities to meet the specific needs of diverse learners. In recent years, there has been a concerted effort within Western academia to address systemic injustices and promote equity to the point that the equity discourse has become hegemonic in education and academia among educators, researchers, and the general public. This is evident in the integration of social justice education, which emphasizes equity-minded pedagogy. Such approaches intentionally address injustices in the educational system and center the identities, voices, and experiences of historically marginalized students through inclusive course content, materials, curriculum, assessments, and course environments. This model is grounded in the principle that unequal conditions require differential treatment to achieve comparable outcomes. A leading source articulating this approach is the work of Darling-Hammond (2010), who advocates for equitable resource allocation to address disparities rooted in socioeconomic status, race, gender, and other marginalized identities. Of course, I can only provide a brief overview, analysis, and critique of the equity model of social justice in education here – a detailed, exhaustive description and analysis would require a book, if not several books. My focus is on educational practice – how it has been realized in school practices – rather than on the ideology of equity (e.g., "liberation" that can be commonly found in so-called "critical pedagogies," see, for example, Freire, 1986).

In the *equity* model, the root "equal" refers to achieving comparable educational *outcomes* by providing differentiated resources, support, and opportunities based on individual or group-specific needs. Unlike the *equality* model, which assumes that nearly identical *inputs* yield fairness, the equity model acknowledges that students may require different levels of support to achieve comparable success.

For the purpose of my analysis, I abstracted at least the following four major types of equity models for social justice in educational practice. The first is Needs-Based Equity, in which resources are allocated based on individual or group-specific needs. For instance, bilingual education programs provide additional language support for English Language Learners to ensure they can equally access the prescribed curriculum (García & Kleifgen, 2018).

The second is Contextual Equity, which addresses broader systemic issues by modifying policies to account for historical and structural disadvantages. For example, affirmative action in higher education is arguably a temporary tool to correct current inequities faced by minority groups – injustices rooted in the historic discrimination (Bowen et al., 2018).

The third one is *Outcome-Based Equity*, which focuses on achieving similar outcomes for all groups. An example is Finland's education system, which ensures equal learning outcomes by providing extensive support and services for students with varying needs (Sahlberg & Hargreaves, 2011). For example, Finland's school practice of early identification and intensive special education support entails that nearly one-third of students receive personalized intervention at some stage of their schooling. These interventions are seamlessly integrated into regular classrooms, ensuring students with diverse learning needs receive timely and targeted support, thereby significantly reducing achievement gaps.

The fourth type is *Political Equity*. In this case, education is directed against the domestication of the oppressed, toward their liberation from oppression. This preset political-educational endpoint can be achieved through dialogue with students, beginning with learners' real-life problems, especially, but not exclusively, those from marginalized backgrounds. The educational goal in the Political Equity model is to develop learners' capacity "to question, analyze, and transform the world" (i.e., "praxis"). Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau* (1978) provides an exemplary foundation for illustrating the Political Equity model of social justice in education. In this work, Freire moves from theory to politically embedded educational practice, engaging directly with a newly liberated African nation striving to rebuild its society through education rooted in justice and liberation—not mere development or modernization. In *Pedagogy in Process*, Freire writes to educators and political leaders in Guinea-Bissau after the country's independence from Portuguese colonial rule. His letters articulate a vision of education as a political act of liberation, which aligns with the Political Equity model. Education, for Freire, must not aim at "domesticating" the oppressed—making them compliant with the status quo—but rather at developing their capacity for critical consciousness and transformative action (Freire, 1978), which often coincided with political sloganeering and brainwashing by the ruling Communist totalitarian party, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde, PAIGC, in Portuguese) (see a critique of Freire's Political Equity in Facundo, 1984a; Facundo, 1984b; Matusov, 2009, Ch. 4, pp. 73-110).

All of these equity models aim to provide the necessary resources and eliminate barriers that prevent students from achieving comparable educational outcomes as defined by society, while varying in their focus and rationale.

Equal opportunity and equality models: Similar but alternative to the equity model

Two other common models of social justice in education are similar but alternative to the equity model: 1) the equal opportunity model and 2) the equality model. Their similarities and differences illuminate the equity model. All three models represent the Equality Model because they focus on equality, though they differ in how they define it: equality of outcomes, equality of opportunities, or equality of inputs.

Equal opportunity model

"Equal opportunities" can be understood as a form of the Equality-Based Model (in a broader sense) when it involves leveling the playing field to address systemic disadvantages. This approach ensures that individuals or groups facing barriers receive the necessary resources and support to achieve comparable educational outcomes on a more equal footing with their peers. In short, equal opportunities can also align with the equity model if it focuses solely on uniform access when equal educational outcomes are possible and desirable – i.e., in the absence of competition (e.g., grading on a curve). For example, initiatives like Head Start provide low-income children with access to early learning opportunities, recognizing that early intervention is crucial to equalizing long-term educational outcomes (Zigler & Styfco, 2004).

However, in the context of competition, the equal opportunities model directly contradicts the equity model because the design of the educational activity inherently makes it impossible to achieve comparable educational outcomes, given the very nature of competition, which inherently creates winners and losers. In competition, the equal opportunities model aims to ensure that outcomes are determined primarily by participants' efforts, talents, creativity, and luck rather than by unfair systemic (often structural) advantages and disadvantages. In the case of competition, the equal opportunity model aligns with the meritocracy model of social justice. The meritocracy model of social justice in education holds that individuals should be rewarded and advanced based on their talents, efforts, and achievements, rather than their social background, inherited privilege, systemic past or present injustice, discrimination, or identity markers such as race, gender, or class. This model is rooted in the belief that equal opportunity is the key to fairness: if the "starting line" is the same for everyone, then the resulting differences in outcomes (test scores, college admissions, job placements) are considered just. Meritocracy is often promoted as a "level playing field" ideology, usually (but not always) emphasizing personal responsibility, standardized assessments of ability, and competitive systems designed to identify the "best and brightest" (Gutmann, 1999; Hirsch, 1996; Putnam, 2015).

Often, proponents of the equal opportunity model are criticized, especially by advocates of the equity model, for their exclusive focus on the fairness of the competition itself – i.e., "the rules of the game" – while neglecting unequal opportunities in students' preparation for it. For example, standardized tests like the SAT or ACT aim to measure student ability on a level playing field, ensuring all students take the same test under similar conditions. However, these tests often fail to account for disparities in test preparation resources, access to tutoring, students' well-being, disabilities, or the quality of prior education, which disproportionately benefit students from affluent backgrounds (Buchmann, Condron, & Roscigno, 2010; Labaree, 2010). However, arguably, this critique does not undermine the equal opportunity model per se but only its specific implementation, neglecting unequal opportunities for competition preparation. This could be remedied, however. For instance, competitions like the Diamond Challenge for High School Entrepreneurs promote creativity and innovation by providing students with equal access to mentorship and resources (University of Delaware, 2021).

In its own turn, the equal opportunities model challenges the equity model by neglecting the situations when achieving comparable outcomes is impossible and/or undesirable (e.g., competition, highly creative enterprises). Thus, in fields such as art, music, or innovation, achieving equal outcomes is not the goal. Instead, the emphasis is on providing equal opportunities for individuals to express their creativity and talents. For example, in a music competition, all participants are given the same platform to showcase their skills, but the results will differ based on their unique talents and creativity. Similarly, hackathons such as Hack the Hood[2] ensure equal opportunities by providing resources such as mentorship and tools for

[2] Hackathons like "Hack the Hood" are events where people, particularly programmers and developers, collaborate intensively to build software projects within a short time frame, often with a focus on social impact or community needs https://www.hackthehood.org/.

participants. However, outcomes vary widely as they depend on individual creativity, teamwork, and innovation rather than aiming for uniform results (Hack the Hood, 2020).

Equality model

The equality model of social justice (in the narrow sense of this term) prioritizes the uniform distribution of resources, ensuring that every student receives the same treatment and resources regardless of their starting conditions. The model is often associated with principles of universal access and fairness, as described by Rawls (1971) in his theory of social justice. The focus is on equalizing access to primary goods, including education. An example of the equality model is the implementation of free public education systems in which every child has access to the same prescribed curriculum and standardized resources, such as textbooks and instructional time, regardless of their socio-economic background.

From the equity perspective, the equality model is insufficient to address systemic disparities. Treating all students identically disregards the varying levels of disadvantage experienced by marginalized groups. For instance, providing the same amount of funding to schools in affluent and low-income areas perpetuates existing inequities, as students' needs differ significantly in these contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The equality model critiques the equity approach for potentially fostering perceptions of unfairness. Differential treatment can be seen as privileging certain groups over others. For instance, opponents of affirmative action argue that it undermines meritocracy by prioritizing demographic characteristics over equal opportunity (Sowell, 2004). Providing differential resources to address disparities can lead to perceptions of unfairness among those who do not receive additional support. For example, students in schools that are not designated as "under-resourced" may feel disadvantaged if they perceive that their schools lack similar funding or programs (Bowen et al., 2018).

Also, the equity model creates a necessity for proving a deprived person’s need to get support, which may create a stigma for this person. Under the equity model, individuals often need to prove their disadvantages or needs to access additional resources. For example, students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch programs in schools may feel singled out or labeled, which can negatively impact their self-esteem and social integration (Harwell & LeBeau, 2010).

In addition, improving one’s circumstances may reduce one’s support under the equity model and, thus, create a dependency trap. As individuals improve their conditions, they may lose access to support under the equity model. For instance, families who narrowly surpass income thresholds for financial aid or social support programs may find themselves worse off because they no longer qualify for assistance, a phenomenon often referred to as the "cliff effect" (Moffitt, 2002). While the equality model can be criticized for being wasteful in allocating resources to those who may not need them, it prevents stigma and dependency traps, promoting equal rights by providing equal resources for all to succeed, regardless of circumstances.

In the reality model, some receive far more than they need, while others receive far less than they need to achieve the prescribed educational outcomes. In the equality model, everyone gets the same support, regardless of their needs. In the equity model, everyone gets the support they need to achieve more or less the same prescribed educational outcomes.

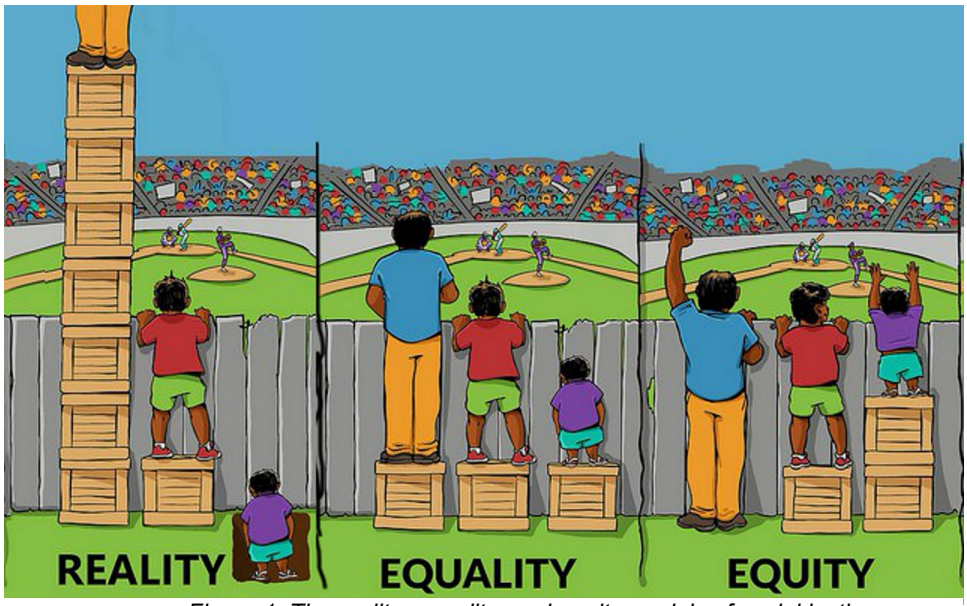

Figure 1. The reality, equality, and equity models of social justice

Figure 1[3] and Table 1 depict the differences and similarities among the Unequal Reality, Equal Opportunity, Equality, and Equity models. The main similarity among the three social justice models (which is also true for the Equal Opportunities model), presented in Figure 1, is that all participants watch the same sports game. To translate this metaphoric depiction into the educational practice, the curriculum, the goal of education, and its quality are the same for all students and are usually defined by others: politicians, school experts, educators, school boards, etc., not by the students themselves as Figure 1 misleadingly suggests[4]. These major purposes of education, defined by the powerful others, can dramatically vary from "liberation and empowerment" (Apple, 2019; Giroux, 2011), "critical thinking" (Piaget, 1973), "democratic participation" (Dewey, 1916/1997), "antiracism" (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019), "commitment to communism" (Makarenko, 1973), "critical examination of life" (Socrates, see in Plato & Riddell, 1973) to the "core knowledge," "back to basics" (Hirsch, 1996), "aligning with job market demands" (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010), "upward social mobility" (Putnam, 2015), "patriotism" (Bennett, 1988), etc. The fight among various equity models of social justice in education, defined by diverse, often conflictual, if not antagonistic, social and moral values, has become a part of the escalating cultural and political wars in education and beyond. For instance, in contrast to the Left-Wing approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion, the Right-Wing approach involves, among others, a focus on teaching patriotism and hiring conservative educators (Horowitch, May 27, 2025; Trump, January 29, 2025).

The inherent focus on sameness in defining educational and justice goals bothers some proponents of educational equity. For example, it is interesting that after a review of the existing equity models in

[3] The "Equality vs. Equity" was created by artist Angus Maguire in collaboration with the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC), a Creative Commons Noncommercial ShareAlike 4.0 license. The "Reality" image, which expands upon the "Equality vs. Equity" illustration by depicting additional scenarios such as "Reality" and "Justice," is often attributed to the Instagram account @restoringracialjustice https://www.bu.edu/diversity/resource-toolkit/inequity-equality-equity-and-justice/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[4] Other problems with these figures: they show students WATCHING the achievements of others, not the students themselves playing the game and performing equally or unequally (Levinson, Geron, & Brighouse, 2022). Another problem with the figures is that although these game spectators are watching the same game, their perceptions of, foci on, and benefits from the watched game can be dramatically different, which is often not supported in many schools and by the equity model of social justice. The third problem is that, in contrast to the representation in the figures, in conventional and even innovative progressive schools, constituting totalized paternalistic education (Matusov, 2025b), students do not choose what to study and what to learn – this is predefined for them by educational experts, teachers, parents, and politicians.

education, critiquing their focus on sameness, Levinson, Geron, and Brighouse simply combined several "samenesses" together in their definition of educational equity:

> To review, we have thus far seen that equity could be understood as:
>
> - Equal distribution of outcomes across populations (e.g., equal percentage of college graduates or of people living fulfilled lives across racial groups, genders, SES, neuroatypical and neurotypical populations, nations, etc.)
> - Equal resources allocated toward education across students, schools, districts, states, or nations (whether measured by money or by criteria such as student-teacher ratio, nurses or libraries per school, technology availability, number of advanced courses, etc.)
> - Equal experiences for each child (e.g., experience of being respected or challenged, opportunities for play, social inclusion)
> - Equal levels of growth or development by each learner
> - Equal outcomes for every learner (academic, social-emotional, or other)

We have seen how each of these may be an important aim and desirable standard for equity under various circumstances, and also how each may be incomplete or even misleading as a stand-alone approach to equity. We have also seen that they cannot all be achieved simultaneously: equal growth from unequal starting places will result in unequal outcomes; equal outcomes will demand highly unequal resource allocation; and even equal experiences such as inclusion or opportunities for play may result in inequalities of some outcomes or opportunities (Levinson et al., 2022).

Although I share the authors' dissatisfaction with the existing notion of equity in education, I think their proposal does not satisfactorily address its problems. In my view, these and similar authors of educational equity remain blind to the totalized paternalistic nature of the notion of equity (Matusov, 2025b). The concept of social justice is deeply embedded in the existing educational practices.

Table 1. The three most common social justice models in education

	Equal Opportunities	**Equality**	**Equity**
What is equal (or near equal)?	Leveling the playing field	Provided input resources	Ensured learning outcomes
Strengths	Fair competition	Unconditional universal support for all, regardless of their needs	Addressing the preexisting unequal and unfair conditions only to those who are affected by these conditions, saving resources
Weaknesses	Neglect of the preexisting conditions beyond the "game" rules, sameness of the goals, attempts to erase cultural and historical differences, insensitivity to the students' needs, sameness of the goals, totalized educational paternalism, insensitivity to a student's unique personal needs and interests	Wastefulness of the resources, insensitivity to the needs, structural injustice, disregard of cultural and personal differences, an emergent sense of unfairness of providing resources to those who do not need them, sameness of the goals, totalized educational paternalism, insensitivity to a student's unique personal needs and interests	Stigmas, dependency, need for measurements, proving needs, punishing success, but cutting out the extra help, emergent sense of unfairness of providing unequal resources, dependency trap, cliff effect, sameness of the goals, totalized educational paternalism, insensitivity to the student's unique personal needs and interests

Why I dislike the equity model of social justice for education

The list of existing critiques of the equity model.

The equity model, while aiming to address systemic disparities, has been criticized for several reasons. I have already outlined some critiques, such as 1) a stigma associated with proving needs, 2) withdrawal of support as conditions improve, which can create a dependency trap, 3) potential resentment among beneficiaries, and 4) in certain educational activities, achieving equal or comparable outcomes might not be feasible or even desirable (e.g., competition, creativity). Nonetheless, additional criticisms of the equity model appear in the literature.

To continue the list of critiques, the fifth concerns complexity in resource allocation. Implementing equity measures often involves complex assessments to determine the specific needs of individuals or groups. This can result in bureaucratic inefficiencies and delays in providing timely support. For example, allocating additional funding to under-resourced schools may require extensive data collection and analysis, delaying the benefits for students who need immediate assistance (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The sixth critique is the challenges in measuring educational outcomes. The focus on achieving comparable outcomes can be challenging to measure and evaluate, undermining meaningful learning and instruction. National educational reforms such as *No Child Left Behind* (2002-2015) and *Race to the Top* (2009-2016) contributed to the widespread phenomenon of "teaching to the test" in American public schools. By emphasizing standardized testing as a measure of school success, these reforms incentivized teachers to focus narrowly on test preparation at the expense of broader, innovative curricula. Research has shown that this approach can limit critical thinking, creativity, and comprehensive learning (Hursh, 2007). Critics of these reforms argue that the pressure to perform well on standardized tests undermines efforts to achieve equitable educational outcomes by diverting attention from addressing systemic inequalities (Au, 2011). Also, educational success is influenced by various factors beyond the control of schools, such as the students' raw intelligence and motivation, disabilities, family environment, and community support, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of equity measures (Diederich, 1969; Sahlberg & Hargreaves, 2011).

Finally, the seventh critique accuses the equity model of its conservatism, hindering, if not entirely blocking, educational and technological innovations. The equity model may inadvertently hinder educational and technological innovations, which are often expensive and unequally distributed, and, thus, when successful, lead to unequal educational outcomes. Innovations such as personalized learning platforms, advanced STEM programs, and cutting-edge expensive educational technologies are typically piloted in select schools, leading to unequal educational outcomes. For example, wealthier schools may implement virtual reality labs or AI tutoring systems, while under-resourced schools lag behind, exacerbating disparities rather than reducing them (Reich, 2020). While expensive innovations spread, they become less expensive and, thus, more affordable through market pressures, public and private grants, and state investment support.

As the famous science fiction writer, William Gibson, said, "The future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed." Trying to ensure comparable educational outcomes severely undermines the future. Inequality is an engine of innovation. Thus, in the name of equity, some school districts ban teaching algebra because many schools could not achieve comparable learning outcomes in algebra for under-representative student populations despite the schools' best pedagogical efforts. A notable example is the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), which, in 2014, implemented a policy delaying Algebra I until the 9th grade for all students. This decision was part of a broader effort to reduce the segregation of socio-economically disadvantaged students into lower-level math classes and to promote equity in

mathematics education. The policy aimed to place all students in the same curriculum based on grade level, thereby delaying the teaching of Algebra I until high school[5]. Similarly, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, public schools discontinued advanced math classes for students in grades six through eight. The district's objective was to reduce disparities between low-income children of color, who were underrepresented in such courses, and their more affluent peers[6]. These equity practices remind me of a famous Soviet joke about socialism: "If we cannot make everyone equally happy, we will make everyone equally miserable."

In sum, both excessive, totalizing equality and excessive inequality are problems in education (and beyond) because both undermine human dignity. Excessive equality leads to totalized educational paternalism, in which others – teachers, educational experts, politicians, parents – always know better than the educatee what the educatee needs to study, when, how, and why. Excessive inequality assaults human dignity by failing to provide sufficient resources for its realization. An authorial judgment, negotiation, and dialogue are often needed to address concerns about excessive equality and inequality (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2018).

Although I agree with those seven critiques, my primary dislike for the equity model of social justice in education is different and much stronger, in my judgment.

My critique: The anti-educational nature of the equity model

Elsewhere (Matusov, 2021), I argued that the difference between the concepts of learning and education lies in the fact that *education is the educatee's positive value judgment about their past, present, or future learning*. According to a sociocultural approach, humans are embedded in and thrown into a flow of unavoidable learning, which they may or may not recognize, reflect on, or judge (Lave, 1992, April). This flow of learning occurs in and out of any educational institution while we are awake. However, even in conventional schools with their equity pressures on standardization of "the same" learning outcomes, different students learn different things in seemingly "the same" instruction, learning environment, and prescribed curriculum, with "the same" teacher, at "the same" physical time, with "the same" peers, etc. Thus, for example, in a math fraction-adding lesson, one student may learn to cope with classroom boredom by smuggling in entertaining activities, so the teacher does not see them. Another student may learn that math is not for her. Another student may learn the pattern for adding fractions to pass school math tests without understanding the deep conceptual math behind this pattern presented by the teacher. Yet another student may learn deep math behind the fraction addition. Another student may wonder what the fractions are for and why one needs to add them in such a complicated way, given that computers and smartphones are widely used; she might not see her parents or other adults around her ever using fractions at all. Another student daydreams during the lesson, learning how to create these eventful daydream plots and stories. The list can be continued. In contrast to the conventional school-based understanding of learning, a sociocultural approach treats the presence of learning as unproblematic because it always occurs; however, the content of this learning is problematic, as it differs across people. Sociocultural educational anthropologist Jean Lave argued that although, in conventional schools, *teaching* curriculum – i.e., what the teacher tries to teach – is the same for all students in the classroom, *learning* curriculum – i.e., what each student actually learns for this classroom event – might be dramatically different (Lave, 1992, April).

Thus, for any learning to become educational, its occurrence and content must be visible to the person experiencing it. For instance, when I was 6, my dad taught me how to ride a two-wheel bike. I pedaled my bicycle while my dad ran behind, holding the seat to keep me balanced. We were running over a big 300-yard road loop in our yard, formed by three five-story buildings. Once, after a turn on the loop, I

[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Francisco_Unified_School_District

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diversity%2C_equity%2C_and_inclusion

was shocked to see my dad smiling and praising me with his big thumb while staying with our neighbors just in front of me. He was not behind me all that time in the loop. I didn't realize that I had completed the entire 300-yard loop all by myself, without his support. I didn't notice that I had learned to ride a bike. At that moment, I lost my confidence and balance and fell off my bike into a muddy pool. After that incident, my dad stopped running after me. I had no option but to ride the bike by myself after a few unsuccessful attempts. I had discovered the fluency of balancing the bike before I knew it; I was able to do it. Actually, becoming aware of this discovery undermined my new ability to ride a bike, but it was apparently important and necessary for my further learning of bike balancing. It both undermined and boosted my confidence riding a bike. I needed to know that I could ride the bike alone without my dad's help to take the next step in my learning.

Some learning is completely invisible to us unless we can see someone who is ignorant in a practice we have mastered "naturally and seamlessly." For example, I had no idea I had learned to walk on slush, snow, and black ice fluently, confidently, and safely in the winter until my South African friend and his wife visited me in Philadelphia. I was amused by their ineptitude at winter walking in Philadelphia after a snowstorm. It was "obvious" and "self-evident" for me not to step on slush hiding a pothole on the road, not to walk over a big pile of snow, especially in party shoes, not to step on and walk normally on apparent black ice, etc. Observing these icy winter newbies who violated all these obvious rules, I realized how much I had learned in my childhood to make all this knowledge natural, obvious, and self-evident. Not only did I not notice this learning in myself, but I also did not notice it in my son or in me teaching him.

However, for learning to become educational, the person who experiences it must notice its occurrence and evaluate its content positively (Becker, 1953). This evaluation determines the extent to which learning contributes to personal growth, addressing the person's interests, curiosities, and needs, as well as professional development, obtaining desired credentials, and other related goals. For example, a student participates in a debate competition and gains confidence, improving public speaking skills. If the student views the experience as valuable, as it enhances critical thinking and communication abilities – this learning is educational for the student. In contrast, another student attends mandatory training on software They[7] rarely uses. While the session provides useful information, the student does not feel that it significantly impacts Their daily tasks – thus, this learning is not educational for the student. Similarly, a student struggles through a complex mathematics course and perceives it as irrelevant to Their career goals. Despite passing the course, the student views the experience negatively, believing it detracted from time spent on preferred subjects. For this student, learning complex mathematics solely to pass the course is unlikely to be educational.

Thus, education is ephemeral, not only because the person's evaluation of Their own noticed learning is subjective, but also because the person's evaluation may change over time. Using the last example, years later, the same student finds that the mathematical concepts learned are essential for analyzing data in Their profession. This retrospective re-evaluation shifts Their perception from negative to positive, reinforcing the long-term value of seemingly irrelevant learning experiences – thus, previously non-

[7] John McWhorter recently suggested capitalizing "They" (and "Themselves") when it refers to a known nonbinary or gender-unspecified singular person, as a way to reduce ambiguity in written language. He proposes that this mirrors the way we capitalize "I"—a practical adaptation that once helped distinguish the pronoun referring to a singular third party with a known nonbinary or non-specified gender from similar-looking letters for referring to a plural third party ("they," "themselves") in handwriting and print (McWhorter, 2025). I follow his helpful invention.

educational learning of complex math concepts becomes educational[8]. Thus, education can be delayed[9]. Conversely, a student who excelled at rote memorization for standardized tests may have initially viewed the experience positively and, therefore, considered it educational. However, upon entering the workforce, the student realizes that these skills lack applicability to real-world problem-solving contexts, leading to a negative re-evaluation of the learning experience (Kohn, 1999).

The problem with conventional and even innovative progressive schooling is that the curriculum, i.e., pre-designed educational outcomes endorsed by the equity model, robs the students of their own evaluative judgments about and design of their own learning (Matusov, 2021). This, in fact, makes the equity model of social justice in education, which aims at comparable, more or less equal learning outcomes predesigned by powerful others, *anti-educational*. I criticize the equity model in education by suggesting that curricula imposed and predetermined by others (e.g., teachers, educational experts, parents, the state), even within progressive frameworks, severely limit students' agency, authorship, ownership, and capacity for self-education and self-direction in their own lives. This criticism reflects a broader philosophical debate about the nature of education, autonomy, and the role of institutional structures in shaping learning experiences (Matusov, 2025b).

Conventional schooling often relies on standardized curricula designed to ensure uniformity, at least at a basic level in educational outcomes. The goal is to provide equitable access to knowledge and skills, pressing all students to meet specific benchmarks. However, this structure inadvertently limits the degree to which students can engage in self-evaluation of their emergent learning and design their educational pathways. By prescribing what must be learned and how success is measured, students become passive recipients rather than active co-creators of knowledge. The students' passivity – i.e., student agency suppressed by totalized paternalistic education[10] – often becomes an argument for even more paternalistic education because, as its proponents argue, "many students prefer being told exactly what to do — freedom is too scary — uncertainty is often frightening." In my view, this is a self-fulfilling prophecy of totalized paternalistic education.

A poignant example can be found in democratic schools, such as, for instance, Sudbury Valley School (Greenberg, 1991). Democratic schools often reject the notion of a pre-designed, imposed curriculum entirely. At Sudbury, students determine the goals of their educational journeys, engage in self-assessment, and co-create the learning environment. This approach stands in stark contrast to the equity model, which often prioritizes uniformity over individualized learning trajectories. Research by Gray (2013) highlights that students from such democratic schools develop strong critical thinking skills, intrinsic motivation, and adaptability, attributes that conventional and progressive models struggle to cultivate due to their reliance on predetermined goals. When students are deprived of the opportunity to shape their educational experiences, their capacity for deep, transformative learning diminishes.

[8] This point about the ephemeral nature of education can inadvertently justify totalized educational paternalism. Paradoxically, this possibility of positive reevaluation by the student lies deep in the concept of conventional paternalistic education, forcefully equipping a student with a "toolkit" for the future. "You may not understand what it is for, now! But one day you will appreciate it!" However, the fact of the student's future possible reevaluation of Their past learning does not justify the present robbing the student of Their here-and-now education (Matusov, 2025b).

[9] This is how totalized paternalistic education is often justified, starting with Kant. Recently, I have developed my critique of this justification (Matusov, 2025b).

[10] Several democratic educators have noticed this phenomenon that they referred as "[conventional] school intoxication" (Llewellyn, 1998): "Children who come to Summerhill as kindergartens attend lessons from the beginning of their stay; but pupils from other schools vow that they will never attend any beastly lessons again at any time. They play and cycle and get in people's way, but they fight shy of lessons. This sometimes goes on for months. The recovery time is proportionate to the hatred their last school gave them. Our record case was a girl from a convent. She loafed for three years. The average period of recovery from lesson aversion is three months" (Neill, 1960, p. 22).

Critics might argue that abandoning predesigned curricula risks exacerbating inequities by leaving students without essential knowledge and skills. However, research on alternative education models demonstrates that self-directed learning environments can produce outcomes comparable to, and in some cases surpassing, those of traditional systems. For instance, studies on Montessori education, which, in part, involve self-directed education (Lillard, 2016), show that students often excel in creative problem-solving and social-emotional development, attributes that rigid preset curricula struggle to foster. And yes, these diverse outcomes are unequally distributed, which is not a minus but a plus, as it promotes uniqueness rather than sameness among students.

Finally, I want to address the boundaries of my criticism of the equity model of social justice in education. Do the conditions exist when such a model of social justice would be legitimate in education? I think Figure 1. above and Figure 2 below nicely illustrate these conditions: 1) when the educational goals are set by the students themselves, not by the powerful others, 2) when these goals are very similar, and 3) when these goals are not in competition with each other. Under these conditions, the equity model of educational social justice is legitimate.

Since the equity model in education aims to achieve comparable learning outcomes for all students, its shared educational goals would have to involve well-defined knowledge and skills that the students should set for themselves in advance. Using Aristotelian terminology, this makes the educational practice a form of *poiesis* (Aristotle, 2000; Markus, 1986; Matusov, 2025b). For example, consider students in vocational certification programs (e.g., the Electrician Licensing Program), who aim to become certified electricians. The students may have a shared goal of passing the same licensing exam and acquiring the same technical competencies (e.g., wiring, safety codes) to become certified electricians. Their preset curriculum is standardized, outcomes are measurable, and performance is evaluated against identical benchmarks. In this case, the equity model could be legitimate because it aims to equalize access to the same job qualification, and the skills and knowledge are well-defined and fixed in advance. My colleague and I defined such education as “training” or “closed socialization,” and contrasted it to “open creative socialization” or “critical examination of life” (cf. Socrates) (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2012). The latter two define educational practice as *praxis*, again using Aristotelian terminology. In *praxis*, the educational goals, values, and definition of quality (and, thus, the value of learning outcomes) *emerge* from the practice itself and from the students themselves, rather than preexisting the practice. Thus, the equity model of social justice in education is incompatible with *praxis*. In short, the equity model of social justice in education is legitimate only when students’ educational goals are highly similar, non-competitive, and involve the *poiesis* type of educational practice.

In conclusion, my general assertion that the equity model is anti-educational – except in the narrow conditions described in the previous paragraph – is rooted in the belief that genuine education, which is self-education, emerges from student authorial agency, self-evaluation, and ownership of their education and lives. By reimagining education as a personal, autonomous, and emergent process rather than a prescriptive one, educators can better honor the diverse needs, interests, and potentials of all learners. This leads to the uniqueness model of social justice in education.

Figure 2. Uniqueness vs. equity models of social justice in education. The uniqueness model is on the right, in which students with diverse interests pursue their educational endeavors alone or with peers and/or adults. The equity model is on the left, in which all students are expected to achieve comparable educational outcomes.

The uniqueness model of social justice in education

An alternative, non-equality educational justice is defined by the person's opportunity to pursue their unique interests and needs – the uniqueness social justice model, as Figure 2 illustrates[11]:

The left side of the picture illustrates the equity concern in educational justice: that all people have the opportunity to watch the same sports game, regardless of their interest in the game (or lack thereof). Equity-based justice focuses on ensuring that students have equal opportunities to watch the same sports game (i.e., to achieve nearly the same learning outcomes). Equity involves *positive* liberty (Berlin, 2017) of achieving the outcomes desired and defined by society.

In contrast, the right side of the picture highlights an educational justice grounded in uniqueness, emphasizing that everyone pursues their own interests and needs as they define them for themselves. The uniqueness model involves affirming and supporting personal *negative* liberty (Berlin, 2017), in which educatees can define and pursue what is good for them without asking for permission from the educational authority.

Institutionally, the uniqueness model of educational justice has realized itself in democratic schools based on 1) the right of the students – alone or with the help of others – to decide whether to engage in education or not, what to study, how to study, when, where, and with whom, why to study, etc., and on 2) democratic self-governance, including addressing violations of the democratically accepted school rules (Matusov, 2023). When a student's rights to pursue their interests and needs – educational or otherwise – conflict with each other or require the school's resources, a school assembly is often called to address these issues. Democratic schools exemplify the uniqueness model of educational social justice by

[11] The "Equality" illustration was created by artist Angus Maguire in collaboration with the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC), a Creative Commons Noncommercial ShareAlike 4.0 license. The "Uniqueness' illustration was developed by me using Internet images covered by a Creative Commons Noncommercial ShareAlike 4.0 license.

empowering students with the autonomy to make decisions about their learning and by fostering democratic self-governance within the school community (Greenberg, 1991; Neill, 1960; Rietmulder, 2019). This approach is evident in two key practices:

1. Student Autonomy in Education: In democratic schools, students have the freedom to choose whether to engage in education, what subjects to study, how to approach their learning, and with whom to collaborate. The educatee can make these decisions alone, together with other educatees, and/or with the help of a professional educator. This self-education environment respects individual interests and promotes intrinsic motivation. For instance, the Philly Free School[12] operates on the principle that students explore the world and themselves at their own pace, participating in a self-governing direct democracy. This model enables students to explore their passions without the constraints of a standardized curriculum, thereby fostering in-depth, personalized learning experiences.

2. Democratic Self-Governance: Since their students' self-education occurs in a collective environment, democratic schools implement structures that allow students and staff to participate in decision-making processes, including the creation and enforcement of school rules. This democratic governance ensures that the community collaborates to address conflicts and allocate resources. At The Clearwater School[13], for example, the School Meeting serves as the governing body where students and staff have equal votes in decisions affecting the school's operations. This structure empowers students to take responsibility for their environment and learn the principles of democratic participation.

The uniqueness model of educational justice can be defined as the affirmation, support, and realization of a person's right to pursue self-education and freedom from totalized paternalistic education. Self-education involves the person's decision-making about whether to study, what to study, why to study, how to study, with whom, when, where, etc. This decision-making process can be done by the person alone, with peers, and/or with professional educators, as determined by the person (i.e., an educatee). The right to self-education and freedom from totalized, paternalistic education must be part of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights). However, unfortunately, this is not the case now. On the contrary, Article 26.1, claims, "Elementary education shall be compulsory." This article must be excluded from the Declaration because coercion of students is not compatible with the concept of Human Rights (Matusov, 2025b).

According to the uniqueness model of educational justice, the state, society, educational institutions, local communities, and families shall be obligated to support a person's self-education by providing diverse necessary resources such as access to the activities desired by the person, leisure time free from the necessities to work or provide a livelihood for themselves, tools and equipment for the activities desired by the person, the rich educational environment (including social networks), pedagogical support for the person's studies desired by the person, fundings, safety networks (physical and psychological safety, food, lodging, health), and so on (Illich, 1983; Matusov, 2020).

Of course, these obligations to support the person's engagement in the desired activities, which involve self-education for diverse people, may conflict. Resources are often limited and have to be prioritized. Diverse types of personal freedom within a person and among people can sometimes not only conflict with one another but also cannot be harmonized. One virtue must be chosen at the expense and sacrifice of another virtue. People must make these agonizing choices (cf. Isaiah Berlin's notion of radical

[12] https://phillyfreeschool.org/how-it-works

[13] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Clearwater_School

pluralism, Kelly, 1978). The uniqueness model's responsibility is to resolve these tensions and conflicts while guaranteeing or sacrificing the person's right to self-education.

The following example illustrates how democratic schools, grounded in students' freedom to own their education and lives and in limited self-governance, operationalize the uniqueness model by honoring individual student choices and embedding democratic principles into the fabric of the educational experience. By doing so, they create environments where students are active participants in their learning journeys and the governance of their communities. Let me describe and analyze a case that I witnessed a few years ago,[14] at The Circle School (Rietmulder, 2019).

The announcement regarding the organization of the Gaga Ball Game[15] Corporation[16] was posted on the school bulletin board at least a day before the regular morning school assembly. A group of mostly tweens also submitted a written proposal to the school clerk (an elected student) in advance to start a new school corporation. After the assembly finished its informative, mandatory part, the case was announced. Only those interested in deciding the case remained at the assembly – the rest went to their own activities and businesses (though they could stay if they chose to)[17]. As far as I remember, all school staff members remained, along with all the children who submitted the proposal, some of their friends, and some other children who were interested in it. The proposal for the new school corporation was read, and then the public discussion started. Several issues quickly emerged.

First, why was a new school corporation needed when the new enterprise could have been a part of the existing Game Corporation? Why couldn't proponents of the Gaga ball game approach the existing corporation and request its sponsorship of a new game? Some school staff members were concerned that the proliferation of duplicate school corporations created unnecessary bureaucratic burdens and wasted resources. The Gaga ball proponents responded that the Game Corporation had been inactive that year and, thus, unhelpful. Everybody seemed to agree with this observation. This led to the next issue.

Second, how could the new corporation's organizers be sure that it would not disintegrate within a few months, as some school corporations had in the past? I sensed the implicit reference to the Game Corporation. What was the exact need for a new school corporation, and why now? The new organizers of the Gaga Ball Game Corporation responded that the game had been popular for quite some time. The primary concern was the maintenance of the equipment, specifically the Gaga balls and Gaga pits, which the school had previously acquired. The game equipment was sometimes neglected and even abused because no one systematically maintained it. The corporation would regulate who could borrow the equipment, how it would be used, and who would clean it up when and where. Additionally, the game had previously generated numerous disputes and conflicts among its players regarding the rules, which the new corporation sought to address. The latter goal led to the third issue.

[14] My recollection was verified by a TCS staff member who was also present at the school meeting, along with his permission to use the school's full name here.

[15] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaga_(game), for visualization of the rules and game, see the following video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyd5Ks7Zik0.

[16] Corporation in a democratic school is an assembly of participants, which may or may not include the school staff, united by some interest or activity, that has certain autonomy defined by the charter granted by the school meeting, the self-governing body of the school. The autonomy may include funds, equipment, freedom to define and regulate who, how, when, and where to operate the corporate equipment and funds, fundraising activities, and so on. The corporation can elect its officers, define its membership and the process of its enrollment, and dissolve itself (Rietmulder, 2019).

[17] I respectfully disagree with the University of Austin (UATX) president Carlos Carvalho, who said during his convocation speech: "Democracy runs on equality; freedom and excellence run on inequality" https://www.thefp.com/p/in-defense-of-inequality). In my view, democracy is based on the *equal eligibility* for the participation in collective decision-making. Neither participation, contributions, voices, influences, and outcomes are equal in democracy, as it was evidence in this case of real practicing school democracy.

Third, the assembly members, mostly staff, asked whether the proposed corporation leaders planned to draft some "standard rules" for playing the Gaga ball game. One of the organizers said, "Yes." "What would happen if a Gaga player violated the standard rules?" – "The player will be referred to the JC [i.e., the Judicial Committee investigating violations of school rules and punishing the convicted violators]." The proposal to refer the matter to JC caused a disturbance, as other organizers and the present staff disagreed. The violation of the (arbitrary) standard game rules was equated with a violation of the school rules. An assembly member added that he opposed the school's intrusion on Gaga players' rights to choose their own game rules, modify them, create new rules, and negotiate among themselves, even though it might lead to disputes and, occasionally, conflicts. The proponent of standardizing game rules objected that disputes over game rules distract players from playing and create a mess. Others replied that disputes and even conflicts were natural parts of all games, sometimes frustrating and sometimes fun. The assembly voted overwhelmingly, but not unanimously, to reject this part of the proposal. At the same time, the creation of the new Gaga Ball Game Corporation was accepted, pending the development of its formal charter and the election of its officers. The school clerk (a teen student) recorded the assembly's decisions, which were then posted on the school board.

I was impressed by the democratic school assembly's support of the students' initiative to launch a new corporation, while also preserving the rights of Gaga ball game players to their diverse game rules, rule negotiations, and rule disputes. The majority of the school meeting focused on the rights of future Gaga players, which were in conflict with the rights of the Corporation, at least some of its activists, to have a conflict-free game and to establish and dictate the game's standard rules. The rights to self-education were in conflict and required resolution, which was achieved through democratic deliberation and voting.

I consider voluntary, leisurely play to be tacit self-education because it often involves emergent learning that players may recognize as important to them. Positive evaluation of the experienced learning constitutes education (Matusov, 2021). Additionally, play may generate a desired curriculum for some players who want to actively study how to improve their performance, learn the game's rules and strategies, enhance the game itself, resolve game conflicts, and so on. In other words, these players may involve themselves in self-designed education, which is a future-based self-education (Matusov, 2025b).

Further, the school staff members view negotiations, argumentation, problem-solving, disputes, and conflicts emerging in a play as the participants' private or semi-private matters, which are important for the participants' learning, cognitive-socioemotional development, and personal growth, in which the school must not interfere until some participants ask for help or a school rule is broken, according to one of the participants or an observer. The latter will lead to "writing up" the standard rule transgressor to refer the case to the Judicial Committee's investigation, which will decide whether the school rule is broken and, if so, what punishment, if any, the rule transgressor must receive (Rietmulder, 2019).

According to Piaget (Piaget & Smith, 1995) and Kant (1803/2012), in such dramatic play encounters, children's egocentric perspectives collide with each other, pushing forward their cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, these dramatic play encounters create "the zone of proximal development," making the children "taller than they actually are" (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Gray (2013), these dramatic play encounters teach children the importance of democracy in play because if the play's conflicts are not resolved or, at least, compromised to the satisfaction of all participants, they may withdraw their voluntary participation, which may threaten the survival of play. Because of that, the children's experiences of occasional collapses of fun and play disintegration are no less important than their recoveries from the play crises.

Limitations of the Uniqueness Model of Educational Justice

What are the limitations of the uniqueness model of educational justice? When, under what conditions, can it become illegitimate?

The first case of the illegitimacy of the uniqueness model of educational justice that comes to my mind is when self-education is immoral or maybe illegal. Let me give an example from my past teaching practice. When I was a schoolteacher in a Soviet school, I was teaching physics in eighth grade. A young man, a student in my class, was kind of a generational criminal. His parents served prison time, his grandparents served prison time, and his older brother was in prison. He asked me, as a physics schoolteacher, to teach him how to design a knife, a flying knife that he planned to use for his future crimes. Although designing flying knives was an interesting physics and engineering problem, I refused to teach him that because, as an educator and a person committed to morality, I thought it was fundamentally immoral and illegal to guide him toward becoming a better criminal. Yes, his inquiry into designing effective flying knives was part of his self-education, as he defined it at the time, but I personally and professionally disagreed with his self-education as a means of becoming a better criminal (Matusov, 2022).

The second case of such illegitimacy is a case of exploitative self-education, when it is done at the expense of the self-education of other people. As I described in the previous section, a young teen in the democratic school wanted to impose his rules of the Gaga game on all his peers and school staff, in part to profess in this particular version of the game at the expense of the other players' freedom to develop and profess in other possible versions of the game. His self-education, defined as professing in his version of the Gaga game, conflicted with the school's other members' self-education, which involved creating and experimenting with alternative rules for the game and professing in the game under these rules. The young man wanted to exploit the democratic school's existing organizational structures to impose his self-education on others. When the school staff and his comrades, who also argued for the creation of the Gaga game corporation, realized this exploitation at the meeting, they rejected his demand.

The third case of the illegitimacy of the uniqueness model of educational justice is the use of dirty politics in democratic decision-making to manipulate opponents into accepting a collective decision desired by a minority. As I researched civil disobedience in a democratic school by interviewing staff, alumni, and students (including alumni from another democratic school) (Matusov, 2025a), cases of such dirty politics emerged in the interviews. Interviewees reported cases in which a powerful minority used procedural tactics to delay voting until proponents became so discouraged that they lost interest in their proposals. Another dirty political tactic involved "building invisible walls," in which a powerful minority created the impression in the school assembly that the proposal they opposed was impossible, even though it was not true. There may be other conditions that render the uniqueness model of social justice in education illegitimate; further investigation of this issue is required.

Taken together, these non-exhaustive cases mark the boundary where the uniqueness model of educational justice collapses under its own ethical weight: it loses legitimacy when self-education becomes harmful, exploitative, or manipulative rather than dialogically accountable. Self-education cannot be defended merely by its authenticity to the learner if it aims at immoral or illegal ends, commandeers others' learning for private gain, or corrodes democratic life through strategic bad faith. In these moments, the uniqueness model reveals its dependence on an ethical ecology it cannot itself guarantee: responsibility to others, respect for plural self-educational trajectories, and procedural integrity. Educational justice grounded in uniqueness, then, is not an absolute license but a conditional right—one that holds only as long as self-education remains answerable to shared moral constraints and to the coexistence of multiple, equally legitimate educational projects.

Uniqueness and Dialogism

Russian educationalist and educational philosopher Alexander Lobok criticized the modern positivist social sciences, especially developmental psychology, for their totalizing focus on typicality in people (specifically, children). His criticism can be applied to education and to the equity model of social justice:

> For an "objective" external onlooker, the childhoods of different children are largely indistinguishable. All children play certain games, attentively listen to fairy tales, react to various events, and so on. In fact, nearly all modern psychology research testifies to these "childhood uniformities" and their typologies. The reason for this supposed uniformity is a flaw in the main approach of modern psychology. Modern psychology often focuses on universal, generalizable, predictable, and regular principles, which are the standard of science. Anything else is viewed as non-scientific. How else [can it] be?!
>
> The problem with this conventional approach to psychology, however, is that the human being is the only 'object' in the Universe that is defined by a subjective cognizing world of her or his own, building above the subjective lived experiences and feelings and redefining them –a world, unique for each person, which cannot possibly be viewed from outside, except for some of its outward objective artifact manifestations of this subjective cognizing world. If so, a question emerges: can a particular human being, his/her particular and unique subjective cognizing world, be a subject of science –a subject of scientific observation and interpretation? Can a particular child with his/her unique subjective world, subjective Cosmos, not overlapping with subjective cognizing worlds of all other people in principle, be a subject of science?
>
> Thus, for a researcher, it would appear strange to avoid addressing this [personally] subjective world since it is exactly the disparities of people's inner subjective experiences that, in all likelihood, make up our essence as humans. It is not what a person has in common with other people that makes them become a unique personality. On the contrary, what makes one a genuine person is precisely what he or she by no means shares with others. I strongly argue that the phenomenon of childhood is not defined by those things that make children of a certain age group category look mostly alike. Childhood, rather, is made of the diversity of children's views, experiences, and fantasies that are unique for each person and different from anyone else's experiences. Probably, this non-overlapping of human subjectivities is the deepest and most important enigma of human beings (Lobok, 2017, p. SIa2)

Following the Soviet philosopher of dialogism, Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), Lobok argues that a person's uniqueness is revealed to another person in a dialogic encounter, when "consciousnesses with equal rights" encounter each other in an event (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 6). Totalized paternalistic education, with its focus on comparable learning outcomes for all students (cf. the equity model of social justice in education), is a major obstacle to such a dialogic encounter, which implies unpredictable and incomparable "learning outcomes" for each participant. A dialogic encounter requires the affirmation of the freedoms of its participants to engage or disengage in the dialogue, to define and redefine its topic and purpose, and to assess its value.

Pursuing my "dialogic pedagogy" in university teaching, I recognized the incompatibility between totalized paternalistic education and a dialogic encounter, revealing the uniqueness of my students and me, in the early 2000s, while it took me another eight or so years before I reached the wisdom and bravery to start experimenting with disassembling my paternalistic education in favor of students' self-education and my fiduciary pedagogy (Matusov, 2024). The following is the description of the event of my realization.

In one of my past method classes, I taught for future teachers, I encountered a bizarre phenomenon. As is common practice among education professors (e.g., Pinar & Grumet, 1976), I invited

my students—prospective teachers—to discuss both good and bad teaching practices from their K-12 schooling experiences, with the aim of using these reflections to inform their future instructional methods: what to follow and what to avoid and why. In class, we discussed what made these examples "good" or "bad". Here are a few examples of "good" and "bad" teaching that the students provided:

"Good Teaching" Examples

1. The Teacher Who Made Math Feel Like a Game
   "In fourth grade, my teacher, Ms. Santos, turned long division into this whole 'mission' thing. She made it feel like we were spies cracking secret codes. We even had code names. I used to dread math before that, but suddenly I was doing problems at home just to be ready for 'missions.' It was fun, and it stuck—I still remember how to do it today without even thinking."

2. The One Who Let Us Be Curious
   "My 5th-grade science teacher let us bring in random stuff we found and ask questions about it. One kid brought a bird feather, and we ended up learning about flight and bones and stuff for a whole week. It wasn't in the textbook, but we were all into it. That was the first time I felt like learning wasn't just about passing a test."

"Bad Teaching" Examples

A. The Shamer
   "I had this teacher in second grade who would read our test scores out loud. Like, what?? I remember crying because I got a 72 [out of the 100 total] and everyone heard. That's not teaching—that's just public humiliation. After that, I stopped even trying because I was too anxious."

B. The Punisher
   "In 3rd grade, if one kid messed up, the whole class lost recess. It made us turn on each other, honestly. Like, one time this kid was late finishing a worksheet, and we all had to sit in silence. We were 8. That wasn't fair, and it definitely didn't make me learn more."

Based on these examples of teaching, I designed "pedagogical problems" (like "math problems") for my students, for example, "A student did not finish his class math assignment in the morning. What would you do as her teacher?" or "How would you motivate low-achieving students to study more?" I expected that most students would attempt to use "good teaching" strategies (as guided by Progressive Education) that they had experienced in their prior schooling, as we discussed in the previous class meeting.

To my great surprise, most of my students used strategies from "bad teaching" to address pedagogical problems, including students who had previously raised these strategies and criticized them as "bad teaching" they had experienced in their K-12 schools. For example, they would deny their future student recess if the student did not complete their morning math assignment, requiring the student to finish it during recess. When I pointed out that, in our previous class, they had qualified this teaching strategy as an example of "bad teaching," this inconsistency did not bother my students at all. They did not admit they were wrong at the previous class meeting, where they criticized this strategy as "bad teaching," but they now embrace it as a sound teaching practice. How could it be that my students could not see "an obvious [for me] contradiction"?! As one of my students replied, "Students don't like it [e.g., being their recess taken from them, reading test scores out loud in front of the entire class], but it must be done [by their teacher] to ensure equal learning outcomes for all." The latter point was my student's manifestation of the hegemony of the equity discourse in education.

My students' insensitivity to their contradictions puzzled and perplexed me. When I shared my perplexity with my close colleagues, they commiserated with me, while we collectively blamed the students'

lack of reflexivity and other deficits. Why couldn't they be guided by the good teaching approaches they experienced in the past? What was wrong with them?! It took me some time to change my analysis.

After agonizing reflection, I shifted my focus from questioning why my students were indifferent to the obvious contradictions and disruptions between their past student experiences and their future teaching. Instead, I decided to accept my students' perceptions that there were no disruptions and contradictions. What was continuous across their past K-12 student experiences and their current experiences as future teachers and college students? I began to wonder what aspects of their K-12 and college experiences had prevented them from recognizing these "obvious" contradictions. I hypothesized that it was "survival." In K-12 schools, they aimed to survive as K-12 students; now, they were learning to survive as future teachers. As long as their mindset was survival, they couldn't see contradictions. I needed to shift them from a "survival mode" to a "dream mode" to teach them good education practices. I also realized that my grading system contributed to their survival mindset, so I had to abandon it.

To test my hypothesis, I gave my students blank index cards and asked them to write in one or a few words or to draw a picture of their response to the following situation: "Imagine that you come to the classroom, where your class meets – whatever class, not necessarily ours – and you see on the classroom door a sign saying, 'Class is canceled.' What would be your emotional reaction to this sign?" I asked my students not to sign their index cards. I collected the cards, drew three faces on the blackboard – a happy face, a neutral face, and a frowning face, – read their cards, and invited them to code each card using the three faces on the blackboard. Then we took the tally to count how many cards were coded by each face. The high majority of the cards were in the "happy face" category: "YEAH!", "Terrific!", "Sleep!", "Great news!" (Matusov, 2009, pp. 358–360). After some discussion, I asked them whether they wanted their future elementary school students to be happy when their teacher, namely them, got sick and their class was cancelled. This puzzled my students. None of my students wanted their future students to be happy when they, their teachers, got sick, and the class was canceled. I asked if it was possible and what kind of teaching it required. They started dreaming by developing progressive teaching scenarios. I was happy. … Until one of the students – I still remember her face and voice, but unfortunately, not her name – brought us back to earth by saying: "It's impossible because school forces us to attend the classes, professors force us to study what they, not us, think is important, and grade our work. Until this continues, most students will be happy when their teacher gets sick, and the class is canceled." This is when our dialogic encounter occurred, at least, for me – big time.

In sum, the ontological, eventful, dialogical approach to education is grounded in the personal freedom to define and disengage from one's own education. To define one's own education and the freedom to say no to it is also the basis of the uniqueness of social justice in education.

Conclusions: The Sociocultural Economic Foundation of the Uniqueness Model

The uniqueness model of social justice in education offers a compelling alternative to the equity-based framework by prioritizing authorial agency, personal interests, self-directed learning, and self-education (Matusov, 2025b). As illustrated by fables such as "The Animal School" and by real-life examples from democratic institutions, this approach respects and nurtures each learner's distinctive talents and aspirations. Rather than striving for uniform "comparable" learning outcomes, the uniqueness model empowers students to define their own goals, rationales, and pathways, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation, creativity, and long-term engagement.

By embracing the uniqueness model, educational institutions shift the focus away from standardized achievement to cultivating environments where diversity of thought and interest thrive. This reimagining of educational justice challenges the traditional notion that fairness lies in equal opportunities

or equity alone, instead recognizing that true justice emerges when learners are supported in becoming their authentic selves. As seen in the case of The Circle School, this model not only encourages personal responsibility but also promotes democratic values as students collaboratively negotiate and shape their educational experiences. The uniqueness model of social justice requires economic, political, and institutional support for its realization (Matusov, 2020).

Evolutionary psychologist and educational scholar of democratic education, Peter Gray (2009), made a keenly reflective observation about developmental psychology serving mostly conventional schooling, suggesting that different types of institutions and practices promote distinct psychological paradigms. I would like to extend his observation to the concept of social justice in education (and beyond). Institutions and practices of totalized paternalistic schooling generate equality- and equity-based social justice. In contrast, institutions and practices of democratic schooling generate a uniqueness social justice model. I think that the equity and uniqueness models of social justice in education (and beyond) not only belong to different ideological paradigms but to different cultures.

An external reviewer of this manuscript (for another journal), commenting on a previous draft, asked me to address, “Please also consider what your individualist focus both offers and sacrifices compared to equity initiatives that often make broader assumptions about groups (based on gender, race, etc.).” In my view, the formulation of this request reflects our paradigmatic differences. First of all, I do not consider my approach “individualist.” Unfortunately, the English-speaking world is trapped in the individualism-collectivism dichotomy due to a lack of terminology (and, probably, other deeper issues beyond the scope of my discussion here). A Slavic concept, “lichnost’” (“личность” in Russian), moves away from this dichotomy through its focus on sociocultural authorial dialogic agency (Matusov & Smith, 2012; Matusov, von Duyke, & Kayumova, 2016). I have found that both the individualist approach with its focus on an atomic, self-centered person and the collectivist approach with its focus on group identities (e.g., “based on gender, race, etc.”) are oppressive because they both totalize, finalize, and essentialize the complex and transcending human nature. The collectivist approach fits the equity model of social justice. In contrast, the concept of lichnost’ moves away from the individual-collective continuum, emphasizing authorial agency, personal responsibility, and ontological dialogue (Bakhtin, 1999).

After reading another earlier version of this essay, my colleague Zhixian Zhuang raised a very helpful and critical question: “How does the uniqueness-based model address structural inequalities that stem from broader socio-economic conditions or factors beyond the school environment?” As Zhixian nicely pointed out, this question extends beyond education to a discussion of the kind of society, its economy, politics, and axiology that supports education based on the uniqueness model of social justice. In the past, I made this “reverse engineering” analysis in my book titled “Envisioning education in a post-work leisure-based society: A dialogic perspective,” which reflects the direction of my answer (Matusov, 2020). In brief, the Equality-based diverse social justice models (including the equity model) in education (and beyond) are often hindered by scarcity- and needs-based societies. In contrast, the uniqueness model of social justice in education is supported by abundance- and leisure-based societies (Klein & Thompson, 2025).

In conclusion, in my respectful disagreement with a co-founder of the American Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, the ardent promoter of the European Enlightenment, I proclaim that it is not the case that “all men are created equal,” but rather all persons are born unique, grow unique, shaped by the unique circumstances, and author themselves unique, despite their apparent and undeniable similarities. To respect and dignify a person is to acknowledge and affirm the person’s uniqueness – recognition and affirmation of which is the basis of human dignity. The uniqueness model redefines the purpose of education by aligning it with the broader goals of personal fulfillment and creative societal contribution. As more educational institutions explore and implement this alternative paradigm to social justice, the potential for transformative change in the educational landscape becomes increasingly evident.

This shift holds promise not just for individual learners but for society as a whole, fostering a generation that values and celebrates diversity, innovation, authorship, creativity, self-actualization, personal responsibility, liberal democracy, and self-determined growth.

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