

Against totalized equity – in favor of a contextualized uniqueness model of social justice in education: My clarification responses to the commentators' challenges



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Abstract

This response essay clarifies and develops my argument for a contextualized uniqueness model of social justice in education by engaging five commentaries on my earlier editorial, "Against Equity." I reject neither equity as a concept nor as a model of social justice. Rather, I challenge the totalization of equity as the default grammar of educational justice. First, I distinguish paternalistic educational power from fiduciary pedagogical asymmetry. The educator should not possess sovereign authority over the educatee's education but should be conditionally subordinated to the educatee's educational wishes while remaining constrained by a pedagogical fiduciary duty. Second, I question institutional curriculum design that precedes concrete educator–educatee relationships; thus, I examine whether human equality, when treated as the primary humanistic value, can obscure irreducible uniqueness. Third, I clarify scarcity- and affinity-based life as phenomenological and existential conditions rather than merely economic ones. Fourth, I reject romanticized learner autonomy in favor of meta-autonomy: the educatee's right to choose educational independence, dependence, interdependence, or combinations of these, including voluntarily requested "autopaternalism." Finally, I argue that uniqueness is not produced by a cultural technique such as rereading. It is epistemologically presumed, dialogically recognized, and culturally affirmed. Drawing on Bakhtin and Lobok, I treat human subjectivity as unfinalizable, nonoverlapping, and resistant to reduction to types. I conclude that equity and uniqueness are contextually legitimate but asymmetrical models of educational justice: equity can protect enabling conditions, whereas genuine education depends fundamentally on recognition of the educatee's authorship and uniqueness. This distinction reframes social justice around the concrete person rather than standardized distributions, identities, or outcomes.

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Introduction

I am honored that my editorial (Matusov, 2026) received five critical and thoughtful commentaries. Each commentary raises theoretical issues worthy of analysis in its own right, as Alexander Markov and Oksana Shtayn also demonstrate in their commentary (Markov & Shtayn, 2026). My purpose here is narrower: I use the commentators' challenges to clarify and further develop positions that I tried to articulate in the original essay on equity and uniqueness models of social justice in education. I therefore organize this response around selected quotations from the five commentaries. I do not claim that each quotation represents the commentator's central argument. Rather, I select passages that expose points of tension, ambiguity, or disagreement that help me sharpen my own position. In that sense, this response is deliberately asymmetrical: it is less a review of the commentaries than a clarification of my argument through dialogue with them.

1. *Olga Sugurova: Asymmetry of power in education*

However, the equity model conceals a still deeper problem that Matusov names but does not fully excavate: the question of who. Who are “we” —these givers of resources, these distributors of educational justice, these managers of equitable outcomes? The equity framework presupposes a subject position that it never interrogates: the benevolent distributor who stands above the system, surveys the landscape of need, and allocates resources to those who lack them. It is a position of power: the power to define what counts as a need, what counts as an outcome, what counts as success, and who counts as deficient. The equity distributor is the one who decides that the student in the back row needs more resources, that the school in the poor neighborhood needs more funding, and that the marginalized group needs more access. And in every act of this deciding, the distributor acts as the giver and reproduces the asymmetry between those who give and those who receive, between those who define justice and those who are subjected to it. The collective, giving “we” is another opium of the faceless masses that the ideology of equity propagates, perpetuates, and produces as its own unquestionable good (Shugurova, 2026, p. C3, bold mine).

Although, in general, I agree with Olga Shugurova's overall argument here, describing the collective totalizing paternalistic “we” that is, arguably, illegitimate in genuine education, I want to use this opportunity to comment here on her wording, “reproduces the asymmetry between those who give and those who receive.” One version of the equity social justice model defines the relationship between the educator and the educatee as a power symmetry, criticizing conventional institutionalized education for its paternalistic asymmetry of power, where educational authority has the right to define education for students and force them to attend (e.g., Basu & Barton, 2010). Also, some proponents of Bakhtinian dialogic pedagogy, grounded in Bakhtin's ontological dialogue among an encounter of “consciousnesses with equal rights” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 6), regard a symmetry of dialogic rights between educator and educatee as a constitutive feature of genuinely dialogic pedagogy (e.g., Kullenberg & Säljö, 2022; Miyazaki, 2019). I want to emphasize that I do not suggest Olga Shugurova belongs to either group or argues for teacher-student power symmetry, because her quote, or the entire commentary, does not allow me to draw any definitive conclusion on this issue.

In contrast to these and other teacher-student power-symmetry positions, I argue for power asymmetry, in which the teacher has a fiduciary duty to their students and must be subordinated to their students' educational wishes, limited by that fiduciary pedagogical duty and other considerations (Matusov, 2024). An educator serves the educatee when the educatee requests and conditionally approves this service. Thus, for example, in Plato's dialogue called "Meno," a young aristocrat, Meno, asked Socrates about the origin of virtues: whether the virtues are innate (and, thus, the best political order must be aristocratic) or learned (and, thus, the desired political order must be democratic). However, at first, Socrates was interested in discussing what virtue is. After some struggle over the topic, Socrates realized he must give up his topic because Meno came to him for help, not the other way around¹ (Plato & Bluck, 1961).

This educator-educatee power asymmetry violates Bakhtin's principle of an encounter of consciousnesses with equal rights. As I argued elsewhere (Matusov, 2023, p. E9), the educational dialogue is not a "man to man" final dialogue (Bakhtin, 1999; Buber, 2000) because the educator is restrained by Their social pedagogical role and pedagogical fiduciary duty, while the educatee is not and can participate in the educational dialogue as a whole *lichnost'* ("личность", in Russian, see a terrific discussion of this concept in Shugurova, 2026). At times, educational dialogue can reach the quality of the Bakhtinian ontological dialogue but cannot be defined by it because otherwise the educator will lose Their pedagogical fiduciary orientation, aiming at serving the educatee's self-education (Matusov & Brobst, 2013), i.e., to.

It is also important to mention that genuine education can happen without an educator: either in the form of an autodidact, when the educatee studies by Themself, or when the educatee studies exclusively with Their peers (Schwarz, Lison, & Brandel, 2026). At the same time, an educatee may utilize the fiduciary service of an educator when the educatee feels it is necessary.

2. Muhammad Rahimi: Dialogic coordination

In dialogue with Matusov's 'Uniqueness Model of Educational Justice,' I propose dialogic coordination as an alternative to standardization-as-sameness. Dialogic coordination seeks to support students in arriving at their own conclusions about their educational goals while enabling institutions to design programmes that align with and support those goals. It fosters the articulation and critical examination of students' values, aspirations, and concerns, expands the space of possible trajectories, and supports the construction of pathways to realise their educational goals through sustained, open dialogue" (Rahimi, 2026, p. C11).

I want to take issue with Muhammad Rahimi's concept of "dialogic coordination," in which institutions design curriculum (right?) programs that align with and support a student's educational goals. I want to raise the following questions for Muhammad. How can institutions design these curriculum programs before even the teacher meets the student? Why should these curriculum programs exist outside of the teacher-student relationship rather than emerge in this relationship? Why even "programs"? I feel that the institutions illegitimately interfere in the teacher-student pedagogical relationship. I think educational institutions must serve to facilitate these relationships rather than impose curriculum programs

¹ Nevertheless, in my analysis, consequently, Socrates manipulated Meno, using his ignorance, to steer him to Socrates' favorite topic (Matusov, 2009).

on the teacher and the student. No? An educatee and then a teacher may reply to the institution: 'I do not need your dialogic negotiation. Leave me (us) alone.'

3. *Adail Sobral, Karina Giacomelli: Remaining equal in our human status*

Recognizing diversity in the sense that we are all different and unique—while remaining equal in our human status—enables educators to respond to persons in ways that consider their specific ways of being and needs, rather than treating them as varied instances of an idealized model that defines what counts as “equal” (Sobral & Giacomelli, 2026, p. C18).

I wonder what it means to “remain equal in our human status.” One influential strand of Enlightenment humanism elevated human equality as the highest value in its fight with feudal hierarchy (cf. “All people are created equal²”, “Liberty, equality, and fraternity,³” “Consciousnesses with equal rights⁴”, but “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others⁵” ☺). This Enlightenment focus on human equality, in the context of the fight against feudal, innate hierarchy, is understandable. This Enlightenment model of social justice has become ubiquitous and hegemonic in modern times. However, terms such as “equal” or “unequal” are inherently quantitative, implying a mutually replaceable quality as its unit of measure. Human properties become quantitative only when we treat them as objects rather than dialogic partners, which is legitimate in certain circumstances. But as the highest human values, treating people as objects is not ethically legitimate (Graeber, 2014; Kant, 1785/1996). I wonder whether quantitative concepts like “equal human status” or “equal rights” create a trap here, because other people are accepted or even tolerated *objectively, only* because “we are alike” or “we are all equal.” The focus on “being equal” still creates an oppressive pressure to conform and agree. I wonder whether an alternative non-quantitative humanism focused on diversity and uniqueness can be developed and applied contextually, alongside a contextually limited equality Enlightenment model. For example, Bakhtin’s concept of “consciousnesses with equal rights⁶” might be replaced with “non-transparent consciousnesses, recognized by each other as unique, that are deeply interested in each other...”

4. *Agung Listiadi: Non-economic nature of scarcity- and abundance-based societies*

My first concern is with what might be called the “conditions of possibility” for the uniqueness model. Matusov acknowledges, in his conclusion, that the uniqueness model requires “economic, political, and institutional support” (Matusov, 2026, p. E22) and that it is best supported by “abundance- and leisure-based societies” (Matusov, 2026, p. E22). Yet this acknowledgment remains underdeveloped. What does this mean for the vast majority of the world’s learners, including children in rural Indonesia, sub-Saharan Africa, or the urban poor in the United States, who exist within conditions of

² American Declaration of Independence.

³ French Revolution motto.

⁴ Bakhtin (1999, p. 6).

⁵ George Orwell’s satire on totalitarian socialism with its hypocritical obsession with equality, “The Animal Farm.”

⁶ “...a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 6).

profound material scarcity, where the freedom to pursue self-directed education is not merely limited but structurally foreclosed? (Listiadi, 2026, p. C23).

I want to clarify my concepts of “scarcity-based society” and “abundance-based society.” Although they are grounded in society's material conditions, as Agung Listiadi correctly pointed out, these concepts are not economic but *phenomenological and existential* in their nature. In a scarcity-based society, people's lives are overwhelmingly defined by their efforts to meet their needs and satisfy their necessities, which may or may not be economic in their nature. For example, a person's ailing health may create needs and necessities that consume the person's most significant lifetime efforts, attention, and concerns. However, even when needs and necessities are economic in nature, that does not mean rich people are not overwhelmingly driven by them. Thus, sociologist Thorstein (2007) studied the American “leisure class,” extremely affluent people, at the end of the nineteenth century, and found that their lives were overwhelmingly shaped by pursuits of status, power, money, show-off, “conspicuous consumption,” etc. Thus, despite all their wealth, the American nineteenth-century “leisure class” belonged to a scarcity-based society. The opposite is also true. Some scholars argue that many hunter-gathering tribes have belonged to an abundance-based society because people in these tribes have spent most of their time in forms of leisure rather than labor or work (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; e.g., Gray, 2013; Quinn, 1997). Finally, in probably all societies, there are some people whose lifestyles are bounded by existential scarcity or existential abundance.

However, while challenging economic determinism here, I would warn against defining these two concepts purely by people's state of mind, thereby definitively transcending their material conditions. Even when people can break locally with their scarcity-based society, some pre-existing, emergent, or created local material conditions and opportunities allow them to do so.

5. Agung Listiadi: Romanticization of learner autonomy

My second concern is with the romanticization of learner autonomy in the uniqueness model. Matusov draws heavily on examples from democratic schools, Sudbury Valley, The Circle School, and the Philly Free School as proof of concept for the uniqueness model. These are compelling cases. But they are also demographically particular: they tend to serve children from middle-class and upper-middle-class families, whose parents are ideologically committed to alternative education and who possess the cultural and economic capital to sustain participation in these institutions (Apple, 2019). To generalize from these cases to a universal model of educational justice risks what Giroux (2011) called “a politics of location,” drawing universal conclusions from a highly situated and privileged vantage point (Listiadi, 2026, p. C24).

I share Agung Listiadi's valid and keen concern about Kantian romanticization of autonomy in general (Kant, 1803/2012) and learner autonomy in specific, exemplified by Sudbury Valley and The Circle School (despite visiting it, I am not that familiar with the Philly Free School). In my recent book, I developed my critique of such Enlightenment romanticization and introduced an alternative concept of “meta-autonomy” to preserve Kant's focus on human dignity, which I share with some qualifications (Matusov, 2025). Meta-autonomy is a recognized right for a person to choose among independence, dependence, interdependence, or a combination of these as the person wishes. Thus, the uniqueness model of educational justice is about meta-autonomy and making it possible for the students to develop it, regardless

of their actual economic circumstances, social class, or other cultural values – which Agung Listiadi justly criticizes in the classic notion of autonomy. For example, in my democratic dialogic teaching practice, my students helped me discover what I call “autopaternalism” as a form of their self-education (Matusov, 2024). Autopaternalism involves a student asking me, her teacher, to force her to study (usually by using imposed assignments, points, and institutional grades) what the student wants to study. This student told me that without my coercion, she could not study what she dreamed of studying all four years at the university because she would put all her effort into other required courses and other life necessities. She told me that she knew I did not like this coercion, but that it is my professional (fiduciary) duty, as an educator, to support her self-education. I agree with her. She needed pedagogical dependency on me, and I had to provide it for her. I consider this case as meta-autonomy and self-education because our relationship was conditional on her approval and defined by her. As far as I know, neither Sudbury Valley School nor The Circle School would accept autopaternalism as a form of a student’s self-education.

6. Agung Listiadi: Rejection of equity’s concern for others

This Bakhtinian insight suggests reframing Matusov's project: rather than positioning the uniqueness model as a rejection of equity's concern for others, we might reconceptualize it as a different theory of how one's educational development relates to communal life (Listiadi, 2026, p. C24).

In my original paper, I did not reject “equity’s concern for others.” On the contrary, I tried to define the conditions under which the equity social justice model in education is legitimate. What I opposed was treating the equity model as the *hegemonic and monopolistic* – i.e., totalizing – social justice vision in education. Similarly, I tried to define the conditions under which the uniqueness model of social justice is illegitimate. Nevertheless, these two models of social justice are not symmetrical in terms of their contextual legitimacy because education involves the educatee’s authorial judgment about the positive value of Their past, present, and future learning (Matusov, 2021). Education is essentially self-education, a private business of the educatee. I argued in my paper that the uniqueness model fits self-education, i.e., genuine education, much better in general than the equity model, although not always.

7. Agung Listiadi: When learner does not know what to study

But what does this support look like in practice, especially for learners who do not yet know what they want to learn, or who have been so thoroughly "school-intoxicated" (Neill, 1960, p. 22) that they cannot access their own desires? (Listiadi, 2026, p. C26).

My brief answer is the following. If a person does not have a desire or interest to study, They are not ready for education (that is not equal to learning, which is ubiquitous). The person should do something else: play, hang out with friends, engage in hobbies, or attend to necessities. Our civilization, which is based on forced/imposed/foisted institutional education and totalizing educational paternalism, has two big anxiety questions. The first anxiety question is: what if a child never develops a desire or interest to study *anything*? The second anxiety question is: what if a child (or a student) never wants to study *something* that society considers *very important* (e.g., learning to read)? A hundred years of the existence of democratic schools, where students are not forced to study anything, empirically show that these two anxieties are basically

self-fulfilling prophecies of totaled educational paternalism: when people are forced to study, they lose their curiosity, interest, and self-confidence in studying. Also, if an alumnus of a democratic school later faces a necessity to learn something They did not learn in Their democratic school, they have self-confidence, motivation, self-discipline, and skills of how to do it on their own or with the help of others, including even reading⁷. When a person wants to study but Their desire is vague, an educator (or peers) can help the educatee explore it, which may or may not lead to education. I discuss this important issue in detail in my recent book (see Matusov, 2025, for more discussion of this issue). Totalized educational paternalism in modern institutionalized education justifies itself through distrust of students, which, in turn, is a by-product and self-fulfilling prophecy of that paternalism.

8. *Alexander Markov and Oksana Shtayn: How the self that exercises uniqueness is produced*

*First, the relationship between uniqueness and rereading requires theoretical articulation. The four commentaries have enriched Matusov's model by adding ideological critique (Shugurova, 2026), practical mechanisms (Rahimi, 2026), ethical grounding in alterity (Sobral & Giacomelli, 2026), and attention to structural conditions (Listiadi, 2026). But none has asked **how the self that exercises uniqueness is produced**. Our contribution is to suggest that the answer involves rereading as a cultural technique... (Markov & Shtayn, 2026, p. C37, emphasis original).*

Let me address this important question from my Bakhtinian dialogic framework. In my view, “the self exercises uniqueness” is epistemologically assumed, dialogically recognized, and culturally affirmed rather than involving rereading as a special cultural *technique*, as the authors suggested. Bakhtin convincingly demonstrated that almost any mundane utterance, such as, for example, a repetition of somebody else’s statement, has a unique authorial intention and intonation in a “once-occurring event” (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 91–92 and 119–120; 1993). At the same time, uniqueness, like creativity, is in the eye of the beholder – it must be dialogically recognized in the unique context. A person may make a bid for uniqueness, which another person may or may not accept (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2016). Finally, a particular culture may or may not put value on uniqueness. As Benedict Anderson (1991) pointed out, “our” mainstream Western modern culture puts extreme hegemonic emphasis on the *typical* rather than the *unique*. The two keen, poetic quotes from Alexander Lobok that I brought in my original paper illustrate this sad point:

For an “objective” [positivist] external onlooker, the childhood of different children is largely indistinguishable. All children play certain games, absorbedly listen to fairytales, 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 is the standard of science. Anything else is viewed as non-scientific. How else it can be?! [Lobok uses irony with this rhetorical question.]

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 [their] own, built 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

⁷ Watch a video about such an alumnus of Summerhill who did not learn how to read and write at school:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o58xTHGYzIY>

a particular human being, [their] particular and unique subjective cognizing world be a subject of science — a subject of scientific observation and interpretation? Can a particular child with his 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 [dialogic] researcher, it would appear strange to avoid addressing this individually subjective [unique] 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 [they] by no means shares with the 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 a diversity of children's views, experiences, and fantasies that are unique for each person and different from anyone else's experiences. Probably, this nonoverlapping of human subjectivities is the deepest and the most important enigma [our emphasis] of human beings (Lobok, 2017, p. 12, *italics original*).

... as an educator, I will deal not just with the behavior of the child, but with a mystery of the child. I would know that any child has a mystery. Any genuine educator knows firmly that any child is a mystery. And this mystery will never be fully revealed and deciphered. And this is great. Similarly, I cannot decipher the mystery of a woman I love—that's also good. God save us from living in the world of fully deciphered people! We don't want to live in the world where other people's consciousnesses are transparent and decoded to us—that would be the end of the world. The essence of a human is in that the human is always more than what we understand about him/her and it's always true, regardless of the age of the person. When developmental psychology textbooks in all their totality describe one or two years old toddler, they actually do not describe anything important about the child (Lobok, 2014, translation from Russian is mine) (Matusov, 2015, p. 400).

I fear that the cultural *technique* of rereading also focuses on typicality – i.e., a student's generic transformation of the subjectivity (in the teacher's desired way?) – rather than a student's uniqueness.

* * *

Taken together, these commentaries have helped me clarify that *my objection is not to equity as such but to its totalization as the hegemonic model of social justice in education*. Equity and uniqueness can both be legitimate, but their legitimacy is contextual and asymmetrical. Equity can be indispensable when it protects people from exclusion, deprivation, discrimination, or other conditions that constrain their possibilities. Yet equity becomes educationally paternalistic when authorities define in advance what an educatee needs, what Their education should be, and what outcomes should count as success. Genuine education, as I understand it, begins elsewhere: with the educatee's authorial judgment about whether, why, what, how, when, where, and with whom to study. This does not require romanticized independence. Meta-autonomy includes freely chosen dependence, interdependence, and even conditionally requested autopaternalism. Nor does it require symmetrical educator–educatee power. The educator's pedagogical fiduciary duty creates an asymmetry precisely because the educator, unlike the educatee, is constrained by a professional obligation to serve the educatee's educational authorship. Finally, uniqueness is neither manufactured by educational technique nor exhaustively knowable. It is epistemologically presumed, dialogically recognized, culturally affirmed, and always potentially surprising. A just education must therefore remain answerable not merely to categories of people but to the unfinalizable person before us.

What do you think?

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