

Learning to Live Together: The Rise of Learner-Led Private Micro-Schools and the Threat to Public Education

Caleb Collier

Georgia State University

In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic caused disruption to nearly every facet of human society—especially the function of schools.

Schooling shifted from a place governed by a bell schedule where students, under the watchful gaze of teachers, worked through common curricula in preparation for standardized testing to an unpredictable, often asynchronous work-from-home scenario that proved difficult to track. At the time of writing this essay, teachers, administrators, policymakers, students, and parents were still trying to figure out what school would look like for the near future. This crisis has caused a renewed conversation within society at large about *what* education is and *how* it should work and prompted the question: “What happens when an education is no longer something that a person goes somewhere to get from someone else?”

This disruption in schooling brought a pressing set of questions to the surface of education discourse for parents and teachers alike. One of

the key topics of discussion has been how to motivate students to learn from home. Terms like *initiative*, *motivation*, and *responsibility* have moved to the forefront in discussing pandemic pedagogies. This article will argue that this conversation, though seemingly novel, is in fact in line with a long tradition of dialogues around the *why* and *what* of education. There have been many scholars over the centuries who have advocated for a view of education that centers the learner in the education project.

Many terms have been tied to these sorts of education philosophies: learner-led, child-centered, progressive, and alternative. For the purposes of this paper, the phrase self-directed learning (SDL) will be used. The most widely recognized definition of SDL came from adult education theorist Malcolm Knowles:

a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.¹

This will be the guiding definition of SDL for the purposes of this article.

There has been an explosion of SDL research in the past few decades.² Additionally, there has been a rapid increase in SDL learning environments due to the growth of micro-school franchises like Acton Academy (in a decade Acton has gone from one campus in Austin, Texas to over 200 locations worldwide). This rapid expansion of private school networks has further complicated the debate around school privatization.

¹ Malcolm Knowles, *Self-Directed Learning* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 18.

² For example, the Alternative Education Research Organization was founded in 1989, the first issue of the *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning* was

published in 2004, the International Society of Self-Directed Learning was founded in 2005, and the Alliance for Self-Directed Education crystallized into a 501c3 in the past decade.

The connection between the rise of SDL schools and the push for school privatization cannot be ignored. Jerry Kirkpatrick argued in his book, *Montessori, Dewey, and Capitalism: Education Theory for a Free Market in Education*, that the reason for schooling was preparation for a future career. He wrote that to “instill in the young a purpose in life is the fundamental aim of education” and that purpose “in life is defined by one’s chosen values, especially career.”³ To Kirkpatrick, one’s purpose (and one’s values) are defined by one’s career choice. School is the place for future workers to gain the necessary skills and knowledge to be productive in their careers.

This, of course, runs contrary to the thinking of educational philosophers like John Dewey, who though critical of schooling practiced in the public education system, saw education as a democratic good. Schools are needed for societies to cultivate a critically conscious citizenry. Dewey is often labeled a reformer not because he was giving up on the notion of public education, but because he was challenging what it had become: an industrialized sorting mechanism, driven by efficiency logic, that molded students into a workforce. Kirkpatrick argued that Dewey was wrong in linking democracy and education together and that instead “the correct connection is capitalism and education.”⁴

What led to this conclusion? Kirkpatrick grounded his argument in the notion of freedom. He wrote the “the distinctive nature of human consciousness . . . [requires] reason and freedom in education. This means nurturing the young, not coercing or neglecting them.”⁵ The *how* (or methods) of education derive from the needs of society, Kirkpatrick argued. In ancient Greece, education was aimed at equipping young

men with rhetorical and life skills to gain power and esteem. During the medieval period, the reason for education was to equip clergy (again, men) for the church. What then is the purpose of education in contemporary American society? Kirkpatrick argued that it is to gain “the culture’s accumulated knowledge and the values and the appropriate skills required to pursue a career and a personal life in a capitalist society.”⁶

Since Kirkpatrick connects education to capitalism (instead of Dewey’s connection of education to democracy), his next argument is for the privatization of education, a complete severance between government and schools. Kirkpatrick’s philosophy is built upon the work of Ayn Rand, who idealized the individual and argued against dependence on others, especially the government. The only purpose of government, she argued, was placing “*the retaliatory use of physical force under objective control*, i.e., under objectively defined laws.”⁷ Government only exists to ensure the autonomy of its citizens by punishing those who infringe on the liberties of others. “Government-run education, which initiates physical force by extorting money from a country’s citizens to provide education for some of the citizen’s children is clearly a violation of this premise,” Kirkpatrick argued. “The only moral educational system that recognizes the volitional nature of human beings is a free-market educational system of competing, for profit learning services.”⁸ Education in this view is not a public good, freely offered to all citizens, but rather a private commodity to be produced, packaged, and sold. “So, in the free market, who will pay for the education of the poor?” he asked rhetorically. “Why, the poor, of course . . . Education

³ Jerry Kirkpatrick, *Montessori, Dewey, and Capitalism: Education Theory for a Free Market in Education* (Claremont, CA: TLJ Books, 2008), 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷ Ayn Rand, *The Objectivist Newsletter: 1962-1966* (Palo Alto, CA: Palo Alto Book Service, 1982), 128. Italics in original.

⁸ Kirkpatrick, 109.

is a staple that everyone who has children must budget for.”⁹

SDL pedagogies, since they are built upon the concepts of freedom and autonomy, provide oxygen to this libertarian school of thought. Most SDL learning environments are housed in private schools, though there have been numerous examples of SDL public schools over the decades.¹⁰ The inability of public-school districts to move toward learner autonomy on a large scale has caused many educators to move from seeing themselves as reformers, opting instead to leave the public education system behind.

Wain put it like this:

Undoubtedly the contemporary neo-liberal discourse of lifelong learning . . . has corrupted an earlier agenda by redescribing the ideal of the self-directed learner differently, tying it in with consumeristic aspirations and with the neo-liberal politics of responsiblising individuals for their own learning, thus dispensing the state from any responsibility for the learning society.¹¹

This acknowledgement—that SDL pedagogies are connected to movements aimed at the complete privatization of education—raises important questions that must be reckoned with:

- What is the responsibility of the government in the education of its citizens?
- Are SDL pedagogies (and their focus on learner autonomy) incompatible with a view of education as a public good?
- Does embracing SDL pedagogies necessitate embracing school choice?
- How have micro school franchises impacted the discourse of privatization?
- What is the relationship between capitalism and education?

This paper will close with an examination of these questions. It must be acknowledged that each of these questions is worthy of its own essay. As such, they will not be adequately addressed in this study. They cannot, however, be ignored.

Privatization and the Death of Democracy

First, the obvious must be stated: education has never been fair and equal in this country.

The quality of education one could access has always been tied to socio-cultural factors: one’s gender, race, zip code, income level, religious beliefs, citizenship status, parental influence, social capital—all of these (and more) affect the type of educational opportunities a person has access to. I, as a white, middle-class male, had a lot of advantages in my educational journey, but still attended a chronically underfunded public high school in rural Appalachia that was shuttered in 2011 due to a dwindling tax base. My educational opportunities were limited by growing up in a small, impoverished mountain town.

Still, though, I achieved a level of education that fostered the skills needed to be a literate, competent problem-solver, capable of basic scientific inquiry and equipped with a broad understanding of world history. Yes, the public school system in general (and my former school in particular) needs a major re-imagining. That, however, cannot be the motivating factor for dismantling public education. For our democracy to survive, education must work for everyone, not just those who can pay a premium for it.

⁹ Ibid., 181

¹⁰ For example, see James Bellanco, Arline Paul, & Mark Paul, *Becoming Self-Directed Learners* (Rolling Meadows, IL: Windy City Publishers, 2008).

¹¹ Kenneth Wain, “Contingency, Education, and the Need for Reassurance,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 25 (2006): 37-45, 40.

Privatization will do two things. First, it will widen the gap between those that have access to capital (economic and social) and those that do not. A recent Harvard study found that over the last fifty years, the percentage of middle-class students enrolled in private schools was cut in half, while upper class enrollment remained steady (Murnane et al, 2018).¹² A possible explanation for this is the rising cost of private tuition, placing these schools out of reach for all but the wealthy. Another is the competitive nature of school admissions, which may prioritize families that can give generous donations to the school. Whatever the reasons for this decline in middle-class private school enrollment, it reflects a larger economic trend: the income gap between the upper and middle class is increasing. The same study looked at what they called the “90-50 gap,” which is the difference between the income levels of the 90th and 50th percentiles of families with school-aged children. In the mid-1970s, the annual income for the 90th percentile of families with school aged children was \$111,000, roughly double the \$56,000 annual income for the 50th percentile. By 2013, the 90th percentile were earning nearly triple the annual salary of the 50th (at a rate of approximately \$184,000 to \$68,000).

The gap is widening. The move toward total privatization of schooling would only accelerate the trend. Wealthy children would continue to attend wealthy schools and be tracked for success. Profiteers would prey on lower- and middle-class families, promising opportunities and upward mobility while delivering education at the lowest cost/highest profit. School design of the past century has purposely tried to mimic the factory. Privatization would make that journey complete, unashamedly turning learning into a packaged product.

Now is not the time for government to shrink back from public education, but rather to finally and fully invest into it. Horace Mann believed it to be the great equalizer in American society. John Dewey saw education as intrinsically connected to maintaining a democratic society. Again, the argument here is not that public education has actually achieved these ideals. Rather, the argument is that now, perhaps more than ever, is the time to lean even more into these ideals—to aspire to an education system that strengthens our social contracts rather than continues to strain them.

This is why education must be a public good. If the purpose of education were only developing marketable skills, as Kirkpatrick claims, and profit were the only metric of a school’s success, then our schools would cease to be anything other than centers for career training. For far too long, schools have operated on that basis. Recent political events in the U.S. highlight what happens when you have a population disconnected from a critical examination of history, who have failed to build the skills necessary to argue, debate, and critically examine truth claims. The very existence of the U.S. government and the well-being of its society necessitate an educated citizenry.

So, are SDL pedagogies (with their focus on learner autonomy) incompatible with viewing education as a public good? SDL environments have predominantly existed in small private schools, well outside of the mandates of public education. What this paper argues is that SDL pedagogies are not just niche education philosophies available only to the small segment of the American public than can pay for them. Rather, these SDL pedagogies, as attested by centuries of education theory and practice, provide a way to enact an education system that fosters both

12 Richard Murnane, Sean Reardon, Preeya Mbekeani, & Anne Lamb, “Who Goes to Private School?”, *Education Next* 18, no. 4 (2018).

the individual skills needed to *learn for oneself* and the community-centered competencies to *learn to live together*. SDL pedagogies are not incompatible with public education, but instead may be the key to salvaging the very notion of education as a public good.

For this to be true, SDL must be protected against its own recent successes. Franchises like Acton Academy have created a streamlined process that allows aspiring school leaders to launch a new school out of their home on a shoestring budget. This approach has gained momentum during the education shifts brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three years ago, the first Acton Academy launched in Georgia. Now, there are five, with even more in the works. Proponents of the approach see this rapidly expanding network as the answer to a bloated and outdated public education system that has increasingly stripped agency from teachers and learners alike in the move toward standardization. The successful growth of these SDL spaces, though, weakens investment in public education and continues to reify a vision of school as a business model. Can SDL be embraced without forsaking a commitment to public education?

What is the answer? History provides some assistance in illuminating potential pathways forward. At the turn of the 20th century, John Dewey oversaw a laboratory school at the University of Chicago. Dewey was a proponent of public education, though critical of the pedagogies entrenched in teacher education programs and replicated in schoolhouses. The lab school was just that—a place to experiment with pedagogical approaches and curriculum design that placed the learner at the center of the learning project. The goal for Dewey was not to replace public education with a network of private

or university-based elementary schools. Rather, Dewey's vision was to use the lab school as a testing ground whose influence would radiate outward, into other universities, teacher's colleges, and school districts. The lab school—though intentionally designed in opposition to the educational approach of traditional schools—was created to save public education, not destroy it.¹³ Likewise, the proliferation of SDL spaces in recent years provides ample opportunities for researchers, policymakers, and pedagogues to see learner-led education in action.

Micro-Schools as Lab Schools

In recent years, I co-founded an institute housed within a small SDL school.

The goal of the Institute for Self-Directed Learning is to take all that is being learned through experimentation with SDL pedagogies in a prek-12 setting and share this information widely with public school partners. Part of the work is teacher-specific (for example, how can teachers in public schools make micro-moves towards SDL in their own classrooms?), part of the work is at the district level, partnering with school leaders to launch SDL public schools (sometimes as school-within-school options), and part of the work is at the policy level, working to create the sort of research that might convince policymakers that public education really is worth the investment, and that SDL pedagogies have much to say to current problems in the design and functioning of the nation's public education system.

The Institute emerged from The Forest School, a prek-12 self-directed learning environment south of Atlanta, Georgia. At The Forest

¹³ For a history of the lab school, see Katherine Mayhew & Anna Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of*

the University of Chicago, 1896-1903 (New York, NY: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1936).

School, educators are called guides (not teachers). Guides neither teach nor lecture, but rather through Socratic questioning guide learners to set daily learning goals and reflect on their progress. As opposed to modes of schools that position the adult as supreme authority and ultimate knowledge-holder, SDL spaces like The Forest School position the adult as an encourager and supporter. This is a reimagining of the role of educators and learners in a school setting. Therefore, part of the work of the Institute for Self-Directed Learning is setting up workshops, courses, and webinars for educators to explore what it looks like to practice Socratic guiding and facilitate SDL experiences.

Another role of the Institute is to produce research around SDL. There are centuries worth of exemplars of learner-led schools in a variety of cultural settings. However, there is a lack of research (qualitative and quantitative alike) around these learning environments. The Institute is designing and implementing a research agenda that will study (among other things) the experiences and progress of neurodiverse learners (youth with diagnosed learning disabilities) in self-directed spaces, SDL as an equity enabler, the connection between e-learning technology and SDL, and SDL and character education. This research will be submitted for publication in journals and presented at conferences. Another key part of the Institute's research agenda is to create literature reviews around SDL topics to serve as a resource hub for those looking to explore learner-led pedagogies.

Finally, the Institute also offers consultation services to public and private schools. These can be light-touch advisory sessions to help clients brainstorm ways to promote learner agency and SDL in their learning spaces. These can also be immersive partnerships to support clients as they build new schools or programs. The Institute has partnered with public school districts, independent school networks, non-profit educational organizations, and established private schools.

These partners can visit The Forest School and access the school's curriculum. This sort of collaboration between public and private partners is key to widely sharing SDL pedagogies and practices.

Conclusion

The success of private micro-school franchises could accelerate the slow death of education as a public good, or this recent boom in SDL school startups could help inject public education with the sort of imagination that reformers and philosophers have been calling for for centuries. The impetus is on those of us in the fields of progressive and alternative education to remain vigilant in casting a vision of education that has at its aim both the flourishing of the individual as well as the maintenance of democracy.

Caleb Collier is a researcher at the Institute for Self-Directed Learning and co-founder of The Forest School. He received his Ph.D. in Teaching and Learning from Georgia State University.