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Self-Directed Learning: Historical and Theoretical Arguments for Learner Led Education

Caleb Collier
Georgia State University

ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS FOR LEARNER LED EDUCATION, by CALEB PATTON COLLIER, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

_____
Peggy Albers, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

_____
Chara Bohan, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Deron Boyles, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Janice Fournillier, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Date

_____
Gertrude Tinker Sachs, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Department of Middle and Secondary Education

_____
Paul A. Alberto, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Education & Human Development

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

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Caleb Patton Collier

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Caleb Patton Collier
Department of Middle and Secondary Education
College of Education & Human Development
Georgia State University

The director of this dissertation is:

Dr. Peggy Albers
Department of Middle and Secondary Education
College of Education & Human Development
Georgia State University
Atlanta, GA 30303

CURRICULUM VITAE

Caleb Patton Collier
719 Hobart Ave Southeast
Atlanta, GA 30312

Formal Education

- B.S. in Religion (Liberty University, 2007)
- M.A. in Religious Studies (Liberty University, 2010)
- Ph.D in Teaching and Learning (Georgia State University, 2021)

Selected Teaching Experience

- Middle School Guide, The Forest School (Fayetteville, GA, 2018 - present)
- Middle School Teacher, Hess Academy (Decatur, GA, 2014 - 2018)
- Graduate Teaching Assistant, Georgia State University (with Dr. Amy Flint, 2015)
- Creative Writing Tutor, Atlanta Public Schools (2009 - 2010)
- Graduate Teaching Assistant, Liberty University (with Dr. Michael Smith, 2007-2009)
- English Teacher (Cairo, Egypt, 2006)
- English Teacher (Nanning, China, 2005)

Selected Research Experience

- Working with The Institute for Self-Directed Learning on conducting a landscape analysis of the field (Summer 2020)
- Recorded interviews with leaders in the field of self-directed learning as part of a study on the history of the field (Summer 2020)
- Graduate Research Assistant, Georgia State University (with Dr. Peggy Albers, 2016)
- Conducting an oral storytelling project with former revolutionary soldiers in Colombia, South America (2010 - present)

Selected Publications

- Collier, C. (submitted for review). Becoming an autonomous learner: Building the skills of self-directed learning.
- Collier, C. (2021). Toward a re-humanizing education: Teaching and learning in a post-pandemic society. *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning, 18*(1), 10-21.
- Collier, C. (2021). Self-directed learning: A 2021 landscape analysis and recommendations for transforming educational practice. [executive summary]. The Institute for Self-Directed Learning.
- Thigpen, T. & Collier, C. (2020, August 26). Virtual schooling: Strategies to help your child excel at self-directed learning. *Saporta Report*.

- Albers, P., Angay-Crowder, T., Collier, C., Fujimoto, C., Pang., M. & Park, J. (2020). Educative experiences in picture books. *FIRE: Future in Education Research, 1*(1), 2-12.

Selected Presentations

- Collier, C. (2021, Nov 5). *A brief history of self-directed learning: Tracing SDL theory through Western education philosophy.* [virtual conference presentation]. 4th International Self-Directed Learning Conference, North-West University. Potchefstroom, South Africa.
- Collier, C. (2021, Oct 14). *Reclaiming agency: Designing education to cultivate teacher and learner autonomy.* [paper presentation]. Georgia Association of Teacher Educators conference. Jekyll Island, Georgia.
- Collier, C. (2021, Oct. 9). *Learning to live together: The rise of learner-led private micro-schools and the threat to public education.* [paper presentation]. John Dewey Memorial Conference, John Dewey Society. Burlington, Vermont.
- Thigpen, T., O'Brian, C., Kenner, B., & Collier, C. (2021, Feb 25). *Self-directed learning: A 2021 landscape analysis and recommendations for transforming educational practice.* [virtual conference presentation]. Leveraging our sources of power: Leading through our nation's pandemic, Ed.L.D. Network Convening, Harvard University Graduate School of Education.
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- Thigpen, T., Bryant, A. Collier, C., Laughlin, M., Toyles, B. (2020, April 14). *15 strategies school and district leaders can use to empower k-12 teachers and students during COVID-19*. [webinar] University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education.
- Collier, C. (2020, February 3). *A hero's journey: Learner outcomes at The Forest School*. [poster presentation] International Society of Self-Directed Learning Symposium. Cocoa Beach, Florida.
- Collier, C. (2019, March). *Self-directed learning in middle school.*[panel discussion] Acton Academy Owner's Conference. Austin, Texas.

Awards/Honors

- Dean's Graduate Award for Commitment to the Discipline (Georgia State University's College of Education and Human Development, April 2021)
- Huey B. Long Scholarship Award (the International Society of Self-Directed Learning Symposium, February 2020)

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS FOR LEARNER LED EDUCATION

by

CALEB PATTON COLLIER

Under the Direction of Dr. Peggy Albers

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the historical and theoretical roots of self-directed learning. Self-directed learning (SDL) is a philosophy of education in which the learner initiates the learning process, identifies the resources to be utilized, sets their own goals, and is involved in the evaluation of their work (Knowles, 1975). The COVID-19 pandemic caused renewed interest in SDL as educators looked for ways to motivate students to direct their own learning in remote settings. However, SDL pedagogies are far from a passing trend. There is a rich history of education philosophers, theorists, and practitioners who have advocated for a view of education that empowers the learner to be the agentic center (Rousseau, 1762; Dewey, 1916; Neil, 1960; Holt, 1964; Freire, 1970; Illich, 1970; Greenberg, 1987). The aim of this philosophical study was to analyze the deep historical and theoretical roots of self-directed learning models, explore exemplars from different cultural and historical settings, and put forward a new conceptual understanding of SDL to inform post-pandemic pedagogies and policies. This study utilized philosophical methods to present arguments, historical and contemporary, in favor of shifting education toward self-directed models and away from a view of education that places teachers, administration, curriculum, and standards at the center of the learning endeavor.

INDEX WORDS: Self-directed learning, learner led education, philosophy of education, history of education, eudaimonia, progressive education

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DEDICATION

To Patsy McManaway, for teaching me to plant sequoias.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Individuals learn deeply when they have control over their own learning process (Merriam et al., 2007). Currently, however, most students in the United States are following rules they did not make, listening to adults give explanations to questions they did not ask. Today, a teacher's task arguably has more to do with behavior management — motivating students to *engage* in the process of learning through rewards and consequences— than it does with cultivating student knowledge and skills. What if, instead, school was a place where learners shouldered the responsibility for their own learning? What if the notion of education was centered on the ideas of individual flourishing and social governance, rather than an arbitrary process that prepares students for a future career? What sort of graduates might such a school produce, and what sort of society might such graduates influence? There is a long line of philosophers, theorists, and practitioners who have advocated for such a view of education. The aim of this philosophical study is to analyze the historical and theoretical roots of self-directed learning models, explore exemplars from different cultural and historical settings, and put forward a conceptual understanding of self-directed learning to inform post-pandemic pedagogies and policies.

This philosophical inquiry is most concerned with the *why* of education. This study argues that education has two functions — to guide students toward individual flourishing and provide real practice in democratic engagement. Flourishing, in this sense, is not tied to a projected income level or career choice, but rather involves all of life — including the freedom to make choices about your community, relationships, interests, hobbies, health, and belief systems as an individual sees fit. This is aligned with Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* — making deliberate choices about the options available, in conjunction with one's value set,

strengths, and preferences (Aristotle, 2012). Flourishing happens when a person has their needs met and the freedom to make meaningful and fulfilling choices about their lives (Raab, 2017). Education does not stop here, however. A meaningful and fulfilling life is not just an individual effort but is pursued among and alongside of other people. Education, accordingly, should have individual and collective flourishing as a primary aim. John Dewey (1916/1944) argued that "the primary ineluctable facts of the birth and death of each one of the constituent members of a social group determine the necessity of education" (p. 3). Education at its most basic level exists so a society can live past a single generation. Because education is a *social* necessity, then, it is up to society to constantly evaluate its methods of education in order to determine whether or not the values and skills needed for a "common life" are being cultivated (p. 7). The guiding principle for Dewey's *Democracy and Education* is engaging in just that sort of evaluation. A critical evaluation of the methods of education in the U.S. is a driving motivation behind this current study as well.

An Overview of Self-Directed Learning

Multiple terms have been used to describe self-directed learning, like *child-centered*, *learner-led*, *inquiry-based* and *alternative/progressive education*. There have also been movements — *free schools, unschooling, deschooling, democratic schooling* — and models, like Montessori and Waldorf, that center the learner in education.[1] Van der Walt (2019) pointed to the confusion around the definition of *self-directed learning*, arguing that the phrase had become so ambiguous and amorphous that it lacked definitional clarity (does the phrase *self-directed learning* refer to how someone learns or why someone learns?). This confusion is echoed by Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), who recommended instead the phrase *self-direction in learning* to

[1] A note here on language: education and schooling are terms that are used somewhat interchangeably in this study. Both terms, when employed, will refer to a society's views, systems, and structures toward educating their young.

highlight that they saw self-direction as more of a process of education rather than an education philosophy. For the purpose of this study, the phrase *self-directed learning* will be employed as an umbrella term tangentially connected to these broad (and sometimes conflicting) theories and models. The rationale is to use consistent terminology throughout the study, focus on the role of the learner in the education experience as self-directed rather than other-directed, and connect to current research in the field of self-directed education. The climax of this study (Chapter Four) will reevaluate the term *self-directed learning*, culminating in the creation of new terminology and a new definition.

The most recognized definition of *self-directed learning* (SDL) comes from adult education theorist Malcolm Knowles (1975) who defined it as:

> 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. (p. 18)

I will use this definition of SDL for the purposes of this study, though further clarifications are needed. Learning according to Knowles is seen as a "process;" it is an unfolding action of experience and reflection. It is not tied to a scheduled course block or an activity dictated by a lesson plan. Also, what differentiates SDL from other pedagogical approaches is the positioning of the learner as the agentic center of this "process." The learner takes the initiative in their own learning. That is not to say that there cannot exist prompts or provocations from *without* — from the teacher, environment, or situation — that draw the learner forward, but the decision to move into the experience, to initiate the process, rests solely with the individual. The learning cannot be forced. Also important in Knowles's definition is the inclusion of "with or without the help of

others." To Knowles, SDL can be solely an individual effort, or it can incorporate the guidance of a mentor or the help of partners. One could teach themselves the art of woodworking, or they could apprentice with a master. I, on the other hand, will trouble this part of the definition, believing that education always exists within relationships.[2] This relational view of education is in line with other SDL theorists (Candy, 1991; Gergen, 1997; Peters and Gray, 2005). Knowles's definition also noted the individual's responsibility in identifying appropriate resources, implementing strategies, and participating in the evaluation of their work. Th freedom of the individual in SDL spaces exists on a spectrum — some SDL environments may give learners complete control on every step of this process, while others may have more structure (a type of *freedom within limits*). These variations will be fully explored in this study. For now, the purpose is to define SDL as a process where the initiative and some level of responsibility rests with the learner.

John Holt (1976), though rarely using the term *self-directed learning*, described such a person as a *do-er*. He argued that:

> …it is the doer, not someone else, who has decided what he will say, hear, read, write, or think or dream about. He is at the centre of his own actions. He plans, directs, controls, and judges them. He does them for his own purposes — which may of course include a common purpose with others. His actions are not ordered and controlled from outside. They belong to him and are a part of him. (p. 9)

Knowles's definition of SDL and Holt's conception of a *do-er* will ground this historical and theoretical exploration. How and in what ways over the centuries has the learner been put at the

[2] To use the woodworker example: even if a person were to learn this craft *on their own*, they would be dependent on the knowledge, tools, and processes developed by other people over the course of centuries and passed on to the current learner in some form.

center of their own learning? What might such views of education have to say to our current moment?

Significance of the Study

Research has shown that SDL increases a learner's self-esteem, personal responsibility, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence **(**Guglielmino et al., 2009; Hoban & Hoban, 2004; Muller, 2008; Ponton et al., 2010; Ponton et al., 2014). Additionally, SDL environments are designed to foster individual autonomy and democratic voice, as well as physical, mental, and emotional safety (Kenner et al., 2020; Raab, 2017). The focus on agency and responsibility in SDL learning spaces contrasts greatly with the traditional school design that focuses on accountability and compliance (Kenner et al., 2020). This is not to say that young people attending schools designed for accountability are unable to make free choices, lead happy lives, or participate in democracy. The point being made is that schools designed for accountability and compliance do not have as their aim the cultivation of those skills, abilities, and mindsets in learners. The discourse of *accountability* has seeped into education from the business world and is a vestige of the industrial view of education that argued that school should function using the same efficiency logic of the factory floor (Thorndike, 1917). Accountability, which limits the autonomy of learners and teachers, has been tied to a spike in anxiety, educator burnout, and disengagement from students and teachers alike (Gallup, 2013; Ingersoll et al., 2014; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Likewise, compliance is aimed at negating freedoms in the classroom. In its landscape analysis, The Institute for Self-Directed Learning argued that:

> Compliance-driven cultures can also damage and stagnate executive function skills in children in other ways because compliance can be understood as the ways in which adults are often viewed as the keepers and disseminators of knowledge, and creators of the

> rules, and students as the passive recipients who must "comply" by their standards and rules and therefore do not prepare learners to think critically, plan intentionally and make good choices. (Kenner et al. 2020, p. 10)

This approach to schooling has led to an epidemic of dependent learners. Hammond (2014) argued that dependent learners "struggle because we don't offer them sufficient opportunities in the classroom to develop the cognitive skills and habits of mind that would prepare them to take on the more advanced academic tasks" (p. 13). Schools designed with accountability and compliance as their guiding principles do not foster independence; they crush it.

This over-reliance on accountability and compliance was laid bare by COVID-19, a disease caused by a novel coronavirus that spread across the globe in 2020. The pandemic caused a seismic shift in education at all levels. Schools experienced prolonged closures of physical spaces and moved learning to virtual experiences in a matter of days. This shifted schooling from a place governed by a bell schedule where students, under the watchful gaze of teachers, worked through common curricula (meaning that all students are working on the same assignment at the same time) 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 dissertation, 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?"

Rarely has the global community, collectively and simultaneously, had to rethink the *why, what,* and *how* of schooling. Though this conversation certainly is timely and

unprecedented at this scale, it is far from novel. There have been many, many voices raising these very questions for a long time. Ever since Meno, a political and military leader visiting ancient Athens made famous in Plato's dialogue of the same name, approached Socrates and asked "whether virtue was acquired by teaching or by practice" (Plato, 1984, p. 1), there has been lively debate about what education is. Do people learn by being taught by others, by practicing for themselves, or are some things just innate?

The absence of in-person classrooms amplified this conversation on the why and how of schooling, particularly in relation to the focus on accountability and compliance that has come to prominence in recent decades. Without a bell to govern time, how would students schedule their work? Without the authority of a teacher's gaze, what would motivate students to complete assignments? Without standardized curricula, what would students even work on? Without test results, how would we measure learning? At the end of the day, who is ultimately responsible for a student's learning? For a moment, it seemed as if educational theorists, practitioners, policymakers, parents and students were on the cusp of a real conversation about the purpose of schooling.

However, that moment of critically assessing and discussing the why and how of education was short-lived. Schools (at least those structured to be in-person learning environments) have begun to find a new normal in the midst of so much uncertainty, but so far these approaches of getting back to way things were as quickly as possible mirror the traditional, *other*-directed views of education that the pandemic showed as misguided. Instead of continuing the conversation of the *why*, *what*, and *how* of education, schools have instead focused on short-term solutions like which technological platforms to use and how to track students from a distance. Absent from this dialogue of how to educate in the midst of a pandemic are how

schools might instead be places that promote individual flourishing and democratic engagement. It is taken for granted in U.S. society that schools function in a set way — with pre-determined curricula, top-down authority, and an interlocking system of compulsion and consequences. John Holt (1976) defined this view of education as "something that some people do to others for their own good, moulding and shaping them, and trying to make them learn what they think they ought to know" (p. 7). This view of education, though widely held, is prohibitive to freedom. It is not designed for individual flourishing, nor does it have as its end a critically conscious citizenry (this is not to say that schools as designed cannot produce flourishing individuals or critically engaged citizens, rather the point is that schools are not designed with these aims in mind). There is, however, a long, rich history of other ways of thinking about education. The aim of this study is to chronicle this history, examine educative spaces that currently foster SDL, and imagine pathways forward for cultivating democratically engaged, autonomous learners.

Experience of the Researcher

I am a product of traditional education. I grew up in a small town in the Appalachian Mountains (population less than 1,000) and attended the local public school. I did well in school, in terms of grades and standardized testing. I attribute this to my ability to know the system of school. I knew how to take the tests and write the papers. I knew how to climb the ladder, learning and internalizing the school rules in preschool and Sunday School class. I also recognize that as a white middle class male, this system was designed with me in mind. Even though I did well, I never really liked school. It was a mandatory part of my life, and so I worked my way through it, bored as I was.

It was not until I entered adulthood that I realized that, though I graduated high school near the top of my class, I did not really know how to do much of practical value. The ability to

score well on tests and write decent essays is a great skill set to have in a traditional school setting but has very little practical use in the real world. So, I learned to teach myself to do the tasks I needed to do. I learned amateur video making skills and created documentaries in South America. I learned through much trial and (expensive) error how to renovate a house. Slowly, I developed the mindset of a self-directed learner. These experiences changed the way I viewed education. No longer did I view the purpose of school as a place to go and receive a fixed set of knowledge about the world. Rather, education became about learning how to teach myself. What do I do if I do not know what to do? How do I access knowledge I need for a particular purpose? What if schools were places where learners received in-depth practice with such real-world problem solving?

This thinking caused me to transition from teaching at a more traditional school to help found and launch a self-directed learning school. This school utilizes a learner-led pedagogy, meaning that the learners themselves are given the responsibility to guide their education. A typical day at this school begins with learners setting goals for what they wish to accomplish that day and identifying the resources they will need to accomplish their goals. The role of the educator in this space is to encourage learners to reflect upon the goals they set, the resources they identify, and the strategies they employ by utilizing a Socratic mode of questioning. In this way, the educator is always a guide, never an expert. My middle school classroom has become a sort of laboratory in SDL. I have explored various ways of channeling the responsibility of learning to the learners themselves. In this approach, I have felt less like a manager whose primary job function is controlling the behaviors of adolescents and more like a guide, someone who is trying to encourage and support learners as they work on their own journeys. I find myself still clinging to vestiges of traditional education — seeking control or predictability in

education. I am learning to let go, to trust learners with their own learning. The people and theories surveyed in this study have helped me along this path.

Whenever I tell someone about my school (especially fellow teachers), the usual replies range between "Wow, what an innovative way to do education!" and "But does that really work?" These replies and the underlying assumptions that lead to them—that the traditional, teacher-directed approach is obviously the way to do education—served as a sort of catalyst for this research project. Many people have accepted the taken for granted definition of school as a place where you go to learn from teachers and fixed curricula the content you are supposed to learn to be successful in life. Realizing how misguided these assumptions were provoked a curiosity within me. How has education been theorized historically? In particular, how has SDL shown up in theory and practice over the centuries?

Purpose of the Study

The power of the *taken for granted* is that it presents itself as common sense, as a logical representation of "just the way things are" (Gunderson, 2021, p. 2). Schools have changed very little since the industrial age when they were modeled on factory efficiency (Toffler, 1970). The purpose of this philosophical study was to explore and present the historical and theoretical understandings of self-directed learning, an education philosophy that has as its aim the flourishing of the individual and the sustaining of society. The industrial model of school that has become custom in in the United States and many other parts of the world is a relatively new approach to education. For most of human history, people have learned by doing, by confronting real problems in their lives and looking for solutions via research, trial and error, and assistance from others. This study will trace these pedagogies —from Aristotle's Lyceum to the latest in e-

learning research — in order to present a compelling picture of education that cultivates both individual happiness and a vibrant society.

Research Questions

The questions that guided this inquiry are as follows:

1. What are the historical educational philosophies that gave rise to SDL?
2. What are the purposes (the *why*) of SDL?
3. What are variations of SDL?
4. How does SDL speak to and against current education philosophies and practices?

Epistemology

Research design is determined by the way a person sees the world. Ontology is a study of being itself. Questions of ontology are concerned with existence and reality. A person's ontology (their views and beliefs on what it means to exist and what constitutes reality) influences their epistemology, or what it means to know something. So, what a person believes about being and ultimate reality shapes what that person believes about knowledge. In turn, a person's theory of knowledge will inform the theories they hold and the way they conduct inquiry. Today, much is made of a researcher's theoretical perspective, that is, the particular theory that grounds and drives the inquiry, and the research methodology, the rationale behind the particular methods of data collection and analysis employed in the research project. There are many camps across the various fields of science and humanities research, some extremely loyal to their particular paradigms and methodologies. The past century has seen a fierce and fiery debate about *what counts* as research, a conflict that still reverberates through contemporary scholarship (Howe, 2009; Meens, 2013). For the purpose of this study, the following section will provide a brief sketch of the philosophical grounds of this inquiry.

Overlapping Paradigms

This research project will build on the work of Thomas Morris (2019) who presented a view of SDL as an overlap of humanistic, pragmatic, and constructivist philosophies. Morris claimed that SDL rested in the nexus of these three philosophies. It should be noted here that these three philosophies contradict each other in many ways. The aim here is not to smooth out or ignore these contrasting views of knowledge and experience, but rather acknowledge that there does exist a sphere where these three philosophies share a common ground. It is a messy space, full of inherent tension, but that space will provide the philosophical grounding of this study.

Humanism

Humanistic philosophy argues that people are free and capable of making wise choices and have great capacity for personal growth (Elias & Merriam, 1995). Morris (2019) argues further that people possess "an urge toward self-actualization," that we all have a type of natural bent toward SDL that is either cultivated or crushed by formal schooling (p. 638). Humanism views learning in terms of growth. People, as individuals and as a collective, grow, develop, and adapt to solve new problems.

Humanism is a somewhat troublesome term, as it has meant many things over the centuries. Discussion is required at this point to clarify how humanism supports the larger work of this study. The term *humanist* first came into the English lexicon in the late 16th century as a way to describe an academic pursuit into ancient languages and writing (Copson, 2015). By the 19th century, the term *humanism* had derived from *humanist*, and not only referred to a student of what became known as the humanities (the study of language, literature, art, culture, history, and philosophy), but a person that strongly posited that such a "curriculum was best guaranteed to

develop the human being personally, intellectually, culturally, and socially" (Copson, 2015, p. 1). As the 19th century wore on, the term *humanism* splintered in meaning. For some, it still carried with it the meaning from the Renaissance, largely an academic pursuit of the humanities (Kristellar, 1988). For others, *humanism* meant a way of centering humanity and the rational human mind as the seat of values, not religious or theistic ethics (see Schiller, 1903; Lippman, 1929). The term *humanism* gets even more confusing as different thinkers added modifiers: George Holyoake (1896) pioneered *secular* humanism which referred to the strictly atheistic, human-centered versus god-centered worldview; *Christian* humanism, espoused by contemporary theologians like Jens Zimmerman (2012), became a branch that attempted to build a Christian worldview that centered humans as rational beings capable of growth; and *religious* humanism sees humanism itself as a religion, complete with "churches," texts, and "religious" practices [the most famous example is the Religion of Humanity created by Auguste Comte (1896/2000)].[3]

As shown above, the term *humanism* has had different meanings over the centuries. For the purposes of this dissertation, when the term *humanism* is employed, it will be as defined by the International Humanist and Ethical Union:

> Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. (as cited in Copland, 2015, p. 6)

[3] For a more detailed overview of these branches of humanism, see Copson (2015, pp. 3-4).

This definition helps to clarify that *humanism* (for this dissertation) refers to the ability for individuals to make reasonable and rationale choices in regard to their own education. Humanism centers the agency of the individual, while grounding the individual in a society of others. Thus, humanism provides a grounding to speak to democratic engagement and the development of ethical values within a society. Humanism (as defined above) will show up in this dissertation through the presentation of Aristotle's principles of innate curiosity and eudaimonia, as well as Rousseau's philosophy of natural education.[4]

Pragmatism

Pragmatism emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries in North America, pioneered by the work of William James, Charles Peirce, and John Dewey. The term itself comes from the work of Immanuel Kant, who argued that there was a distinction between the *practical*, when action and knowledge are separate, and the *pragmatic*, when knowledge and action are combined (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 6). The word *pragmatism* was used to label the philosophy of Charles Peirce (1878/1955), though he did not use the term himself. He wrote this about his theory: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our perception to have. Then, our perception of these effects is our whole of our conception of the object," (p. 31). For Peirce, a person's conceptualization of an object comes from their perceptions of it in the world. What someone conceives of as a *rock* comes from their

[4] Another note on humanism: SDL thinkers and practitioners, especially in the last half century, work from a positivistic perspective framed by cognitive psychology (Bandura, 1977, 1985, 1989, 1997; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). This thread historically grew out of humanism but has diverged from the way I am using it in important ways. It has embraced a Western "scientism" that only counts *knowledge* as valid if it is the result of strict, rigorous systematized scientific methods (Aikenhead, 2001; Hutchinson, 2011). The work of the writers and thinkers influenced by this epistemology will be cited in this study in-depth as it is crucial to historical and contemporary understandings of SDL. However, my interest in humanism is more in the way it centers humans as naturally curious beings who possess the innate desire and rational faculty to make meaning of their world, as well as the tension this view of humanism holds with pragmatism and constructivism.

experience of the qualities (or "effects" to Peirce) of the object — its hardness, density, shape, color, etc. John Dewey (1916/1944) built upon Peirce's theory. He argued that it is not just a person's perceptions of the object itself that builds their knowledge, but the *interaction* (or *transaction*) they have with the object:

> To run against a hard and painful stone is not in itself...an act of knowledge; but if running into a hard and painful thing is an outcome predicted after inspection of data and elaboration of a hypothesis, then the hardness and the painful bruise which define the thing as stone also constitute it emphatically as an object of knowledge. (p. 329)

This idea — that experience comes from interaction with things in the world and that "knowledge has to do with the value or meaning of the experience" — provides the philosophical basis for pragmatism (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 55). This means, by implication, that "knowledge is always concerned with the antecedents and consequences of experience and not with experience itself," (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 55). Pragmatism, then, as an epistemological foundation looks at the world as it is transactionally becoming, analyzing experiences, antecedents, and consequences, and concerns itself with confronting and solving problems experienced in the world (Boyles, 2012). In many ways, pragmatism is the heart of SDL. If learning is relevant and meaningful to an individual, it means that it, in some way, is helping them to accomplish a relevant task in the world. Education is concerned with problem solving, here and now, and is not merely preparation for some future life — be that getting into college or entering into a career. Education is concerned with the real, and as such, should be producing the type of people John Holt would refer to as "do-ers" (1976).

Constructivism

Constructivist epistemology holds that meaning is constructed by people as they interact with the world around them, that people are situated in the world in a variety of social, historical, and cultural contexts, and as such, each individual ultimately constructs their own understanding of the world (Berger & Luekmann, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Vygotsky, 1986/1999). Said another way, constructivists hold that each individual builds knowledge and a sense of self for themselves and that these knowledge bases and identities are influenced by a person's socio-cultural context. Taken to extremes, one could argue using a constructivist epistemology that — since everyone constructs meaning for themselves from their own experiences in the world — there is no common ground for which humans can build shared meaning. This type of relativism is not what is intended here. Rather what is being argued for is a view of knowledge that is situational, grounded in an individual's context, but is shaped by others. This idea needs to be explicated a bit further to avoid confusion.

D.C. Phillips (1997) argued that the term *constructivism* is often employed to cover a wide range of epistemological stances, many that contradict each other. He wrote that most researchers, when claiming a constructivist stance, fail to answer the questions: "precisely what is supposed to be constructed, and how does the construction take place? Why, when, and where does the construction occur? Is the construction something that is done by people deliberately, or…does it just happen?" (p. 151). Phillips delineates between two types of constructivism, psychological and social, that tend to get thrown together in the literature. Psychological constructivism refers specifically to an individual's process of constructing their own internal emotional and cognitive facilities. This type of constructivism is concerned with how a person develops their identity — their self — and how that construction takes place. In other words,

psychological constructivism is focused on how someone builds cognitive capacity for knowledge and meaning making. Social constructivism refers to how public bodies of knowledge are constructed by social forces. Examples of social forces include cultural norms and expectations, political ideologies, religious beliefs, economic theories, as well as concepts of modesty, etiquette, and the taboo. These forces apply pressure to discernable disciplines (math, history, literature, science, economics, etc.), but also to "the common-sense and commonly-held understandings of the surrounding world that are conveyed to all new members of a sociocultural group" (p. 153). Put another way, social constructivism looks to how people make meaning intersubjectively, constructing with one another shared understandings of the world.

As an epistemological foundation of this study social constructivism suggests that meaning is made in relationship with other meaning-makers, particularly as it concerns shared bodies of knowledge and beliefs held in common. That is not to say that social forces are *the only* forces that shape the meaning making process. Nature, for instance, and one's experiences in nature are constructive of one's knowledge base. Logic and mathematical reasoning are another (one could find simple mathematical proof that 1+1=2 without being taught this by another). Also, a person ultimately has free will to decide how and in what ways to accept, reject, or modify commonly held understandings. For this dissertation, social constructivism will be used to highlight that self-directed learning does not mean learning by oneself. Learning always happens in relationship, with and among other learners.

Tensions among Humanism, Pragmatism, and Constructivism in SDL

Humanism, pragmatism, and social constructivism operate as a tripartite structure that holds that humans are rational beings possessing innate curiosity and capacity to make meaning of their world (humanism), that the meaning-making process is mediated by nature and experience (pragmatism), and knowledge develops through relationships with other meaning-makers (constructivism). My conceptualization of SDL recognizes that knowledge is, at the same time, the work of the individual and the collective (an idea which will be explored further throughout this dissertation).

These three epistemological foundations will support this study. From humanism, knowledge (and one's ability to grow in knowledge) is what it means to be human. There exists nearly unlimited potential for the human, both for the individual and the collective, to grow in their understanding of the world and its problems. The pragmatist perspective sees experience as the bedrock of knowledge and views knowledge itself as *productive*, as accomplishing something real in the world. Constructivism argues that meaning is situated within sociocultural contexts, that one's knowledge is shaped by one's relationships, background, and environment. Taken together, these are the epistemological foundations for conceptualizing SDL.

Philosophical Methods

This study, building on the overlapping epistemological foundations above, is grounded in theoretical and philosophical analysis. Philosophical analysis, as a research method, differs in design from quantitative and qualitative studies. Contrary to quantitative empirical studies, using philosophical argumentation as a method does not involve quasi-experimental research designs. Quantitative studies focus on hypotheses, instrumentation, data verification, and generalizability. Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, concern themselves with the setting of the study, the

participants involved, and the methods of data collection and analysis in order to produce insight into a phenomenon. There is value in both qualitative and quantitative approaches, and both types of research add knowledge to the field.

The research design for this study focused solely on building a logically cogent argument, not the statistical analysis of quantitative research nor the descriptive understanding of qualitative research. This argument is presented in three main sections: a historical analysis of the development of theories that undergird SDL pedagogies, contemporary research in SDL (including a sampling of "cases" showcasing SDL pedagogies in practice), and my articulation of SDL pedagogy — a vision of SDL that encompasses both individual flourishing and democratic engagement. My goal is to lay these three sections out in order to form an argument that is historically accurate, intellectually honest, and logically cogent.

As such, the study is organized as a long-form argument presented across three distinct chapters. Each chapter has its own central claim, constraints, and structure. However, the arguments presented in each chapter build upon each other to present a vision of eudemonic self-directed learning, an education philosophy that cultivates flourishing individuals who in turn cultivate a flourishing society. Chapter Two presents historical arguments from the context of Western civilization — Aristotle to 20th century education reformers — placed in a chronological order. This shows that the seeds of what contemporary writers (Knowles, 1975; Guglielmino, 2008) label *self-directed learning* is actually a historically rich and diverse philosophy of education. Chapter Three presents contemporary education research that showcases that SDL pedagogies, when enacted, necessitate a reimaging of the role of the environment, of the learner, of the learning experiences, and of the educator. These data come from SDL researchers, practitioners and learners who have written about their experiences in SDL environments, as well

as my own experience and reflection of working in a SDL school. Chapter Four builds upon the prior chapters and puts forward a new conceptual understanding of *self-directed learning* as an education philosophy that has as its aim both the flourishing of the individual and also the well-being of society. Chapter Five presents implications and recommendations for future research in SDL.

2 THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Self-directed learning (SDL) literature in the last half-century has been notably ahistorical and a-philosophical. Canipe and Fogerson (2006) surveyed dissertations submitted to *Dissertation Abstracts International* that focused on SDL between 1988-2002. They found that 91 dissertations had been written that conducted quantitative correlational studies as compared to four that were grounded in a historical approach of examining SDL. Long (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of SDL literature between 1957-2006 and identified the following themes in the scholarship:

- Measurement and the desire to determine metrics for self-directedness
- Investigations into the origins and sources SDL (personality traits and other psychological factors, home environment and family dynamics, learning environment and experiences, and external pressures and motivators)
- SDL as learning design (as in, something that must be intentionally cultivated by educators)
- Critiques of SDL (mostly around the instruments for measuring) and apologetics defending SDL approaches

In identifying the themes that emerged, Long made this observation:

> What seems to be missing in this literature is an effort to explicate the values and processes associated with self-directed learning in relation to philosophical terminology and perspective. For example, the influence of Adler, Dewey, Nietzsche, James, and Kilpatrick remain to be pointed out. (p. 5)

This lack of philosophical grounding has not been remedied in the past 15 years of scholarship. I examined the articles published in the *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning* (the

flagship journal of SDL research) since Long noticed a lack of philosophical perspectives in the literature in 2007. Out of the 101 articles published from 2008-2020, two were grounded in philosophy (Boucouvalas, 2009; Guglielmino, 2008) and three were historical studies (Brockett & Donaghy, 2011; Guglielmino et al., 2009; Guglielmino & Long, 2011).

The historical articles failed to connect to or significantly discuss SDL prior to 1960. Brockett and Donaghy (2011) discussed the influence of Cyril Houle on the field of SDL through the publication of his influential text *The Inquiring Mind* (1961/1993) and the guidance he offered two of his pupils, Malcolm Knowles and Allen Tough, who would become key figures in the field of SDL. The researchers did not focus on SDL history prior to Houle nor was attention paid to SDL movements that existed parallel to the work being done in adult education by Houle, Knowles, or Tough. In a second study, Guglielmino et al. (2009) combed through biographies of historical figures that pursued SDL in their own education to see what themes emerged.[5] This study was anachronous in its examination of these figures (they were not presented in chronological order) and did not seek to explicate historical contexts for these exemplars in SDL. In a third study, Guglielmino and Long (2011) discussed the 25th anniversary of the International Society of Self-Directed Learning, highlighting notable developments that had occurred in the field between 1986 and 2011, mostly in the field of adult education.

The two articles that took a philosophical stance were topical in nature. Boucouvalas (2009) focused on the concept of *self* in self-directed learning. Here, the author compared, contrasted, and critiqued individual (noted as *self*) and collective (noted as *Self*) notions of selfhood in the hopes of creating common language for more robust international conversations

[5] The researchers chose at random 12 people who they deemed as "innovators." The figures analyzed were diverse in terms of nationality, time period, and gender. The study focused on how these individuals exemplified SDL in their own lives (as noted by their biographers) and paid little attention to placing these individuals in geographic, cultural, or historical context.

around SDL. Guglielmino's (2008) study focused on the *why* of SDL. As such, the argument relied on building a philosophy of education that bolstered SDL and critiqued the other-directedness of contemporary education. Guglielmino harkens back to Plato's Academy, arguing that this early institution of learning focused on dialogue and discussion, not the "*listen to the teacher-memorize-regurgitate* model" that dominates modern schooling (p. 3, italics in original). The author then pivoted to extoling the virtues of SDL (developing resourcefulness, adaptability, and persistence) as exemplified by contemporary quantitative and qualitative research. Left out from building this philosophical argument are centuries of thinkers and educators who argued for views of education (often conflicting and contrasting) that center the learner.

The Claim

SDL has rich historical and philosophical traditions and there is a need in the field for an exploration of these various traditions and how they influence contemporary education philosophy. This approach to education did not appear *ex nihilo* in the research of North American adult education scholars. Nor is there a clear, direct line from Plato's Academy in Athens to the current conceptions of SDL, but rather competing and conflicting traditions that place the learner at the center of education. In fact, the history is so deep and complex that constraints will have to be placed upon this historical survey at the outset.

The Constraints

For the purposes of this study, SDL pedagogies will be traced through the development of Western civilization and education philosophy. There are equally rich and diverse pedagogical traditions in Afro-centric, Eastern, and Indigenous philosophical systems that fit under the concept of what I am calling SDL. The goal of this work, however, is to speak directly to the current education system in the United States (which has been shaped disproportionally by

Western civilization in comparison to other worldviews). To achieve this goal, various strands of SDL pedagogy will be examined as they developed alongside what will be referred to as *traditional* education.[6]

The goal of this chapter is to trace the development of what contemporary scholarship refers to as SDL. To accomplish this goal, this research examined the thinkers and theorists that influenced current articulations of SDL, starting with Aristotle's arguments on the inquisitive nature of humankind. The historical traditions from Aristotle to current SDL features many figures often holding competing views of education. Not all figures in this survey received the same amount of attention. The aim was not to create an exhaustive history, but to build a philosophical argument grounded in this history that is further expounded upon in this dissertation. This chapter is organized chronologically with the following caveat: the following sections focus not only on key figures, but also key concepts that span centuries. As such, a section may trace a particular idea (like apprenticeships or the printing press) through time and the following section may revert back in history to continue the survey. The rationale for this anachronism is to guide the reader through a philosophical argument via the historical development of SDL.

Aristotle's (350 BCE /1908) first premise in his *Metaphysics* is that "all men [*sic*] by nature desire to know" (p. 1) This epistemological claim — that knowledge is attainable and that people, by their very nature, seek it out — would influence philosophers and theorists for centuries to come. This line of thinking can be traced from the work of Aristotle through the

[6] *Traditional* is used here reluctantly. In actuality, it points to the hegemonic hold that this view of education currently holds. When we think of education, the images that come most readily to mind tend to be that of the teacher-centric classroom. The goal of this study is to show that such a view of education is actually more recent in human development than SDL. So, traditional here does not indicate historical primacy, but rather the view of education that currently dominates the education discourse.

work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, alternative school movements of the 20th century, and contemporary educational philosophers. This chapter offers a broad sketch of the philosophical underpinnings of *self-directed learning* (SDL), highlights emerging scholarship in the field, and proposes rationale for why SDL is critical to the education of today's students.

"All men by nature desire to know:" Aristotle's First Premise and Natural Curiosity

Aristotle (350 BCE/1908) argued in *Metaphysics* that humanity possesses a natural curiosity and that people are innately desirous of knowledge. Lear (1988) wrote that "Aristotle is attributing to us a desire, a force, which urges us on toward knowledge," (p. 2). People, by their nature, are curious beings. Lear prefers the term *puzzlement* to *curiosity*, and Aristotle points to this puzzlement as the birth of philosophy, arguing that "a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant" (p. 5). This state of perceived ignorance, this discontentment of not knowing, drives people to satisfy their curiosity.

It is in this journey where philosophy is born. In a person's journey *to know*, they encounter difficulties. In an effort to solve certain puzzles, other riddles are presented. Oftentimes, no solution can be found. At this moment of confoundment, which Aristotle refers to as *aporia*, the puzzle-solver becomes a philosopher.[7] For Aristotle, *learning* is a process of satiating natural curiosity. This process initiates within the learner as a question to ponder, problem to solve, or inquiry to investigate and then moves outward into the world via discussion, dialogue, research, experimentation, and empirical observation. This view of education, where learning has its origin within the learner themselves, is contrary to a view of education that begins with pre-determined external information (standards, doctrines, curricula, etc.) and then creating processes to impose this information upon learners.

[7] *Aporia* translates as "difficult or impossible passage," and is the opposite of *euporia* or "easy passage or travel." Aristotle presents learning is a journey, one through which we will find easy passages and impasses alike.

In fact, this argument against external imposition is the grounding for Aristotle's (350 BCE/2012) view of the innateness of natural curiosity. He wrote: "An indication of this [humanity's desire for knowledge] is the delight we take in our senses; from even apart from usefulness they are loved for themselves" (p.1). Lear (1988) expounded on this: "If the knowledge we pursued were merely a means to a further end, say, power over others or control of the environment, then our innate desire would not be a desire for knowledge…[but] a will to power" (p. 1). The very fact that people take pleasure and derive satisfaction from sensory inputs means that they possess an innate drive, a curiosity, toward knowing.

It is important here to note how Aristotle's epistemology ties into sense experience. Aristotle held that people are born without knowledge but possess the capacity to attain it. As a human grows, they develop the ability to differentiate between various sensory data. Through repeated interaction with an object, the mind begins to form knowledge of that particular object. Lear (1988) summarizes: "Through repeated encounters with items in the world, our sensory discriminations develop into memory and then into what Aristotle calls 'experience'" (p. 2). This experience with particular objects in the world build knowledge. From one's experience with a particular, one could generalize toward universals.

This is view of knowledge via experience is important as it lays the foundation of education in Western civilization. Millennia later, education theorists like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Dewey pointed to *experience in the world* as a builder of knowledge. They will have their critiques of Aristotle and their own approaches to epistemology and education philosophy, but the seed is sown here in the work of Aristotle. Humans are curious by nature, and this curiosity, this puzzlement, drives them to experience the world around them as a way *to know* it, *to understand* it. This drive to know does not need to be imposed from without, from

some external authority. Rather, it has its origins within an individual, propelling them forward into learning. This is where the history of self-directed learning begins for the purposes of this dissertation.

Teachers for Hire: The Rise of the Sophists

In the fifth century BCE., a movement of wandering intellectuals gained momentum in Greece, leading to the creation of *teaching* (in the sense of training or schooling) as a profession (Waterfield, 2000). These *sophists*, so called because of their claims to trade in wisdom (*sophia*) roamed the towns and villages of ancient Greece, offering lessons in oration, business affairs, and the organization of one's own life. Sophistry is generally traced back to Protagoras, a philosopher who came to fame teaching rhetorical and political skills to the elite of Athens, developing a teaching philosophy aimed to help "young men find fame and power" (Waterfield, 200, p. 205). As a group, sophists were extremely individualistic, without membership in any official organization or set belief system. The rise of the sophists is an important pivot in the history of education, when *teaching* became a vocation.

Sophistry is an interesting reversal of Aristotle's view of natural curiosity.[8] For Aristotle, as briefly explained in the previous section, a person is desirous of knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself, not as a means to an end. That is not to say that Aristotle was dismissive of productive (useful) knowledge. For sure, a farmer should seek out how to improve their practices and boost their yield through guided inquiry. For Aristotle, though, there is innate satisfaction in solving the problem (*Why is my crop not producing? Why are plants withering in this section? How can I boost waterflow in this area?*). Yes, there is material good in answering these questions, but more than that, there is a desire to know that has been satiated. This particular

[8] Chronology note: The sophists both pre-date and post-date Aristotle, so this is not to say that the sophists are speaking directly against Aristotle.

farmer has achieved understanding of their particular farm, an understanding which maybe can be applied and useful to other farmers working other land.

Not to lean too heavily into philosophizing at this point, as there is a lot of history to cover in this chapter, but there are some important shifts happening in the approach of the sophists that still echo in contemporary education and should be noted. First, the sophists were not seeking to solve problems or move toward deeper understanding of the world. They began with the end in mind (*Do you want to be wealthy and respected?*) and then sold pre-packaged instruction on how to achieve that end: *Dress this way, talk that way, argue in this manner, act like this,* etc. The result of this approach is the notion that things like *virtue* (*arete*) can be taught from one person to another.[9] Internal curiosity and learning for oneself is lost in the exchange, as now a person can go to an external authority (a teacher) and gather all one needs to be knowledgeable, virtuous, and successful. The second influential shift is that education now comes with a price tag. Knowledge, in the sophists view (which is knowledge as a means to success), became available only to those who could afford it. Waterfield (2000) wrote that Protagoras (and his followers), though claiming to bring education to the masses by teaching anyone to be successful, were "pandering to the political ambitions of the rich" (p. 206). This is by no means the beginning of the class divides between rich and poor in Greek society, but it does position *education* (here viewed as a path to success) as attainable to some and not to others. For Aristotle, all people pursued knowledge to satiate innate curiosity. For the sophists, education became a type of training, a ladder to climb toward the upper rungs of society. That view of education still holds sway over schools in the U.S. A third shift in education philosophy and practice was an embrace of relativism. Protagoras is famous for claiming that "Man [sic] is

[9] see Plato's *Meno* (1992)

the measure of all things" (a more accurate translation is "Of all things the measure is Man [sic], of the things that are, that they are, of the things that are not, that they are not") (Diels & Krantz, 1968, p. 80). Joseph K. Hart (1931) summarized sophistry this way: "Each man shall be the judge of what is good for himself. There is no universal right or wrong. Success is the only good. Anything can be taught — for a price!" (p. 43). Hart's cheeky response points to how infectious this relativism is in modern education. If *success* (whatever that means) is the only good, then the only justified education in society is one that promotes that success. And so, schools are not places to explore natural curiosity, solve practical problems, and reach a deeper understanding of oneself and one's world, but rather are training camps, factories that mold a person into whatever the authorities have deemed a successful individual to be — at a cost.

The rise of the sophists shifted away from an Aristotelian view of knowledge that starts with the inner desires of the individual and works outward through experiences toward a systematized education-as-training-for-future-success that begins with the end in mind and shapes the individual toward that pre-determined end. These two opposing views of education play tug-of-war for the ensuing millennia, so this debate resurfaces many times in this chapter, including the next section.

Learning By Doing: The Role of Apprenticeships in Maintaining Society

The following section covers a large span of history (and is anachronistic with some of the other sections in this chapter), as apprenticeships pre-date Aristotle and still exist today. In fact, apprenticeships are some of oldest forms of education in human history. As far back as 2,000 BCE, Egyptian scribes had to mentor with a master. Stone tablets from these apprenticeships can be seen and studied today in various museums (i.e., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2020). The Code of Hammurabi dictated that apprenticeships were akin to

adoption: “If an artisan has undertaken to rear a child and teaches him his craft, he cannot be taken back” (Hammurabi, 2250 BCE/1904, p. 71). In many ancient civilizations, apprentices were often slaves, forced to learn a craft from a master. In the Middle Ages, craftsmen began to form guilds, creating powerful organizations that oversaw the quality of production and provided systematized milestones for apprentices to meet in their journey toward mastery (Gonon & Deissinger, 2021; Morgan, 2010). The guilds were managed by experienced craftsmen, with those new to the trade joining the guild after a period as an apprentice (George, 2020).

Apprenticeships remained a pillar of education for centuries. Lawyers apprenticed. Surgeons apprenticed. George Washington apprenticed as a surveyor, Benjamin Franklin as a printer, and Paul Revere as a silversmith (Rolland, 2016). Apprenticeships shaped the world of higher education, with “master’s degrees” signifying a person who has mastered a subject and is ready to shepherd others toward such expertise. The Industrial Revolution disrupted the global economy, further increasing the gap between “skilled” and “unskilled” workers. Apprenticeships played a role in the creation of trade unions and specialized vocational training to meet the growing demand for roles like “machine specialist.” The proliferation of factories and assembly lines, though, necessitated a surplus of “unskilled” workers. Many laborers saw the need of immediate work on a factory floor as much more attractive than spending years apprenticing under a craftsman.

Important for this study is how societal views toward apprenticeships reflect societal views toward education, particularly the *how* and *why* of education. With apprenticeships, learning is connected to doing and inherently tied to developing skills for the workplace. There has been a notable divide between academic and vocational education in American history. Miller (1993) conducted a history of vocational education in the United States, pointing out that

the first schools in the U.S. were of religious nature: "[a] desire to replicate British traditions and values cultivated an educational system which would develop and impose Christian values on the New World" (p. 5). Schools, then, were designed to indoctrinate and inculcate the young into the cultural and religious worldview of the Protestant colonizers, not to prepare the next generation with marketable job skills.

This religious view of schooling prompted the founding of colonial colleges, like Harvard (initially the College at Cambridge) in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (Miller, 1993). These colleges were devoid of any vocational training, focused instead on learning as *thinking*, not learning as *action*. The colleges, as places of higher learning, were heavily influenced by the Renaissance and Reformation, and the education theories of John Locke, who in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1692), argued that the "aim of my discourse is…how a young gentleman should be brought up from his infancy" (p. 9). Locke saw schooling (he had much to say on parenting as well) as a mechanism to raise up cultured and educated *gentlemen*.[10] Vocational education, then, was "something for the lower socio-economic classes, taught through imitation, not thought processes" (Miller, 1993, pp. 5-6). So, apprenticeships remained the training mechanism for practical workplace learning.

The Industrial Revolution changed the role apprenticeships played in society. The technological advancements led to the spread of mills and manufacturing as profitable enterprises. The upper-class individuals that had once sought out a *gentleman's* education at the colonial colleges now went straight into business. As the supply of learners waned, colleges

[10] It should be noted that Locke also put forward some arguments that centered the student in the learning activity. For example, he wrote "the fittest time for children to learn any thing…is when their minds are in tune and well dispos'd to it" (Part 4, Section 75). He then argued that children then need to learn to gain mastery over their dispositions in order to motivate themselves, which continued the view of schooling as a coercive force. He did, however, say that courses like Latin should be cut from the curriculum if students cannot work up the motivation to learn it.

began adding vocational and technical courses to their offerings. The passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 would greatly increase vocational education opportunities by offering land to the states to be used as colleges for agricultural and technical training. A result of the Morrill Act, one that may not have been fully intended, was the disruption of traditional higher education curriculum. Miller (1993) wrote: "Classical studies ranging from language and mathematics were integrated for the first time into agricultural and science courses…without any…judgement for which were superior" (p. 13). The Morrill Act would not be the only piece of legislation to impact vocational education.

In 1917, the Smith-Hughes Act was signed into law by Woodrow Wilson, making federal funds available for vocational education (Hyslop-Margison, 1999). This was a victory for social efficiency advocate David Snedden, who envisioned a vocational education model "that responded to the specific labor needs identified by industry…Under his scheme, vocational education would be structured to direct non-academic students into required labor force roles for which they were deemed best suited" (Hyslop-Margison, 1999, pp. 4-5). Sneddon's social efficiency argument for education saw schools as pipelines, providing the needed labor to the appropriate industry. Students were sorted into different tracks, with some placed on academic pathways that provided different learning experiences while others were put on non-academic pathways that funneled them toward specific vocational training depending on the needs of industry. John Dewey, a contemporary of Sneddon's, was vehemently opposed to this career-centric approach to education. His education philosophy will be further explored later in this chapter, but here his views, as contrary to Sneddon's, will be made explicit. He was not opposed to vocational education, per se. In fact, his laboratory school at the University of Chicago (which will be explored later) included occupational skills and know-how in the curriculum alongside of

reading and writing. He believed that "vocational education should be designed to meet student instead of corporate needs, and prepare the former for the various challenges of social life rather than for specific occupational roles" (Hyslop-Margison, 1999, p. 8). Dewey believed that occupational skills were a benefit to students in that it empowered them to solve their own problems, providing them agency to accomplish present tasks, not preparing them for future ones. Sneddon's social efficiency, however, was not concerned with student agency.

The debate on vocational training was especially acute among Black educators in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Booker T. Washington represented one side of the argument. Wary of the rush toward elite education and political participation of Black men during Reconstruction, which Washington saw as a desire to enter into society at the "top," he argued:

> Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the masses of us are to live by the production of our hands and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life; shall prosper in proportion as we learn to draw the line between the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful. No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities. (1895/1975, p. 585)

Washington spoke the above words in a speech at the Cotton States and International Exhibition in Atlanta, Georgia in 1895. In this speech, Washington called on his fellow Black Americans to "cast down your buckets where you are," a call for the Black community to make the most of their current situation instead of fighting for full and immediate equality. This moment became

known as the "Atlanta Compromise" by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/2018, p. 45). The speech, which focused on industrial education and work instead of academic education and progress in civil rights, was cheered by white leaders in the North and the South as a way of maintaining a societal status quo. Black intellectuals and civil rights leaders decried Washington's stance. W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/2018) was one of the most vocal critics and argued:

> Mr. Washington's programme [of industrial education] naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life….[and] practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races. (p. 42)

The education philosophy of Du Bois receives attention later in this chapter. Important for this section on apprenticeships, vocational work, and learning by doing, is to showcase that this debate is politically-laden, racially-charged, and inherently classist — and has been for centuries.

This split in education philosophy — is school a place to learn job skills, academic knowledge, or something else? — will continue through the history of SDL as presented in this chapter. The current point, though, is the evolution of workplace training as it relates to the education system. First, it existed entirely within the system of apprenticeships. Then, select courses were added to colleges and universities (specifically after the Morrill Act). Then, the Smith-Hughes Act opened up more funding for vocational training. Then, school-as-job-training became ubiquitous in education discourse — *Why do children attend school? To prepare for a career, of course!* Many of the education philosophers that appear in this chapter will be pushing back against that assumption.

As vocational and technical training became instituted in colleges (and later in high schools), the practice of apprenticing with a master to learn a skillset waned. Apprenticeships are

no longer the pillars of society that they once were, but they still exist in large numbers, varying from country to country, profession to profession, and company to company. Of importance for the rest of this chapter is how this idea of *learning to do* influences educational theorists. Philosophers and practitioners like Pestalozzi and Dewey will weave occupational skills and know-how into their pedagogies, and contemporary schools like Acton Academy will re-introduce the idea of apprenticeships as part of their learning design.

Gutenberg, The Printing Press, and the Proliferation of Knowledge

The previous section explored the role apprenticeships played in society from Hammurabi to the late 1800s. Another key part of the history of SDL that spans a large gap in time is the advent of the printing press. Like the previous section, it will be important to showcase not just the invention of the printing press, but the effects that the printed word had on education philosophy and discourse, particularly in the United States. Johannes Gutenberg became the first European to popularize printing with moveable type (Childress, 2008). The printing press ushered in the Renaissance by disrupting the ways information was shared (Eisenstein, 2005). Cullen (2020) wrote that:

> The printing press decentralized the role of gatekeeper. In a scribal culture, maintaining some measure of control over ideas and their dissemination was straightforward. In a printing-press culture, control was harder. Within their own jurisdictions, rulers tried anyway, and so did the Church. The word *imprimatur* is Latin for "Let it be printed"—it connoted official sanction. (p. 23)

The knowledge contained in books could now be shared widely and the proliferation of more printing presses all over Europe led to a democratization in information.

The printing press changed the role of the teacher dramatically. Once a person gained a certain level of literacy, they could unlock knowledge of all kinds on their own without immediate need of a master. Complex engineering diagrams, mathematical proofs, encyclopedias, grammars, philosophies, theologies, farmer's almanacs, science texts — this information could be printed en masse in bounded books, held in one's hands, and stored on one's shelf for later retrieval. The advent of the printing press opened up near-limitless possibilities for self-directed learning.

However, this invention also put into motion the Western education system as it exists today. Collins and Halverson (2018) argued:

> As more and more knowledge accumulated, there was a continual increase in what children needed to learn to succeed in the adult world…Universal schooling was ultimately a product of the printing press, and hence education became centered on the major products of literate thought (namely, reading, writing, history, mathematics, and science). (p. 51)

Eisenstein (2005) presented what is considered the most thorough history on the printing press. Titled *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, this two-volume work investigates the role that the printing press played in the Protestant Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Scientific Revolution. These forces shaped Western civilization, especially the role that education played in society.

Printable type, then, was a sort of double-edged sword in the history of SDL. On the one hand, there was a democratization in the sharing of knowledge. Gatekeepers like the church and state could no longer control (at least, not as easily control) the information that spread through society. Also, an individual could much more easily direct their own learning journey without

immediate need of a teacher by easily accessing the information found in printed texts. On the other hand, the printed word gained primacy in Western civilization. Literacy became the bedrock of schooling. Contrasting with the apprenticeship model, education was not about *learning to do*, as in gaining trade skills and experience, but rather about deciphering the knowledge bound in printed texts.

The first steps toward universal schooling in America can be traced to the Act of 1647 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which required towns of 50 or more families to have a schoolmaster and towns of 100 or more families to have an established school (Collins & Halverson, 2018). Reading in this era was seen as a way to impart religious instruction and character formation. *The New England Primer*, published by Benjamin Harris around 1690, was the main source of formal literacy instruction for nearly a century in the American colonies (Monaghan, 2006). The text, mostly a mixture of biblical texts, religious doctrine, and morality lessons supplemented with alphabet rhymes and instructions for beginning readers, taught reading with rote memorization. A century later, Noah Webster published his *American Spelling Book* (also referred to as the "Blue-Backed Speller"), which provided spelling and reading instruction through morality lessons and principles of American government. Through this, Webster hoped to achieve the creation of a shared American culture, language, civic identity, and value system (Kendall, 2010). Webster's primer would be the most influential reading text of the 19th century.

Much more could be written about the impact of the printing press (indeed, Eisenstein's tome is over 750 pages), but the goal here is to draw a direct connection between the printed text and the beginnings of universal, standardized education in the U.S. Once knowledge became accessible in printed texts, education become a rather straightforward process: a person first must

learn to read and gain basic literacy competency, then they were responsible for reading the required texts and absorbing standardized curriculum. The knowledge that a pupil must master was decided by an increasingly top-down process (at first it was left to the parents, then the teacher/schoolmaster, then school administrations, then school boards, then state boards of education). Little by little, the interest and agency of the learner gave way to standardization. There remained those, however, that held onto a view education that placed the learner in the center of the learning project.

Rousseau and Natural Education

The current view of SDL could arguably have its roots in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's *Emile* (1762/2018), for instance, was a part-treatise, part-novel argument for man's ability to be educated by nature. *Emile* is divided into five books, each corresponding to a child's developmental stage and accompanied by what Rousseau believed to be the appropriate pedagogy for that age. Rousseau began the text with the claim, "God makes all things good; man [sic] meddles with them and they become evil," (p. 1).[11] This belief in the corrupting power of society formed the foundation of Rousseau's educational philosophy.

Accordingly, Rousseau's concept of an education was to be isolated in nature, removed from the negative influences of society. A person grows through experience, by interacting with the natural world, strengthening their body, sharpening their senses, and developing their mind's ability to make meaning of reality. The adult (parent/caretaker) is not the *teacher* of the child — nature and the experiences had within nature are the primary educators of the young. As such, Rousseau (1762/1889) argued, "Do not talk to the child about things he cannot understand. Let him hear from you no descriptions, no figurative language, no poetry," (p. 126). The child is to

[11] Two different translations of *Emile* are referenced. They are differentiated by the publication date.

work out inquiries in their own mind and go to nature to test their hypotheses. Rousseau argued against the use of models or representations in the place of real, concrete things. For example, a child should first learn about the solar system by studying the skies and charting the movement of celestial bodies rather than looking at a model of spherical objects that spin around each other (p. 129).

The child should learn by trial and error. If an adult needs to step in to offer guidance, they should do so "without appearing to do so at all" and should not correct a pupil's mistakes, but rather create opportunities for the pupil to reflect on the error (p. 130). Knowledge is gained from experience, but the experience needs to be meaningful, directly related to a real problem that the child is trying to solve. In speaking of his pupil, Rousseau wrote:

> Emile has little knowledge, but it is really his own; he knows nothing by halves; and the most important fact is that he does not now know things that he will one day know; that many things known to other people he never will know; and that there is an infinity of things which neither he nor anyone else will know. He is prepared for knowledge of every kind; not because he has so much, but because he knows how to acquire it. (pp. 155-156)

Rousseau, then, echoed Aristotle's belief that people are naturally inquisitive beings, and that they will gain knowledge, even when (or to Rousseau *especially when*) they are left to their own experiences of nature.

Authorities were quick to respond to Rousseau, banning his books and seeking his imprisonment. He was forced to flee France, moving to Switzerland then to England (O'Hagan, 1999). The spark of the controversy was Rousseau's attitudes and comments toward religion. The larger issue, though, was his view of education. Authorities in the church had spent centuries

espousing the view that nature was perverse and sinful. Education, in this clerical view, meant to show a person the waywardness and deceitfulness of human nature and to guide them toward the teachings of the church, which meant putting off human nature and striving, in obedience, to heed the lessons of scripture as interpreted by priests toward more spiritualized truth. A person needed to be rescued from their natural self, not educated by it. For Rousseau to dismiss this view of education, for him to actually argue that it was in fact harmful to the individual to remove them from nature and instead school them into society, was tantamount to heresy. So, Rousseau's naturalistic philosophy had immediate and immense repercussions.

Rousseau remains a controversial figure in the history of education philosophy. Indeed, many of the thinkers who will be explored in the remainder of this chapter saw themselves as in direct conversation with Rousseau. For the broader purposes of this dissertation, Rousseau represents one side of the SDL debate. His view of education was indeed learner-centered, focused primarily on an individual's journey following their interest and learning for themselves. The main argument of this dissertation is that education really has two aims: individual flourishing and democratic engagement. These two aims will be more fully discussed in Chapter Four. Important for now is the place that Rousseau holds in espousing a view of education for oneself.

Pestalozzi and Froebel: Freedom and Play

The philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau would greatly influence the theories and practice of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. Pestalozzi was born in 1746 in Zurich. He wrote, "I lost my father early; this caused defects in my education which have been a disadvantage to me throughout my life; but it was mixed with good" (1896, p. xiii). Growing up fatherless put hardships on young Pestalozzi, and his childhood was touched by experiences of poverty. This

would greatly shape the views he had on assisting orphans and the impoverished later in life. Pestalozzi attended the University of Zurich, where he studied theology, politics, and law. It was there he encountered the work of Rousseau. "Directly Rousseau's *Emile* appeared," wrote Pestalozzi, "my visionary and highly speculative mind was enthusiastically seized by this visionary and highly speculative book" (p. xvi). In Rousseau, it seems, Pestalozzi found a kindred spirit.

As authorities throughout Europe worked to condemn and censure Rousseau, young students like Pestalozzi organized protests against the government's censuring. This activity brought Pestalozzi to the attention of authorities in Geneva, who viewed Pestalozzi as a sort of revolutionary. He was fined and imprisoned multiple times, which hurt his prospects for finding work in law or politics (Silber, 1973). Inspired by Rousseau's naturalism, Pestalozzi gave up preparation for the clergy or a future as a lawyer, married a banker's daughter, and purchased a small parcel of land try his hand at farming. He named the property Neuhof ("new field") and set about learning the agrarian lifestyle.

Pestalozzi, though, was not much of a farmer or businessman (Green, 1914). The land would not produce, debts mounted, and Pestalozzi faced financial ruin. It was common practice in the region for farmers to take on poor children as farmhands. Green, in his book on Pestalozzi, commented that this system was largely more harmful than helpful to these children: "Ignorant and entirely dependent on others, they developed into hopelessly degraded men and women" (p. 23). Pestalozzi took this idea (using impoverished children as farmhands) and saw an opportunity to infuse it with his emerging educational theory. And so, Neuhof would become an industrial school: "In summer the children would work the fields, in the winter they would spin and weave. In the intervals, even whilst engaged in handwork, they were to receive instruction in reading,

writing, and arithmetic" (p. 23). Pestalozzi wrote of this enterprise: "In poverty I shared my bread with them. I lived like a beggar in order to learn how to make beggars live like men [sic]. My ideal training included work on the farm, in the factory, and in the workshop," (1896, p. xviii).

Pestalozzi, though, soon found himself in financial trouble again, seemingly by his own mismanagement (Green, 1914; Pestalozzi, 1896). Part of the failure of the industrial school at Neuhof was the difficulty of the task. Children who had endured so much neglect for so long were often hardened in their habits, which after a time slightly disillusioned Pestalozzi. Finally, financial ruin came. The institution was closed, but through financial support from friends the family was able to keep the home at Neuhof. "They were, however, reduced to the bitterest poverty. His family connections abandoned him altogether, and most of those who had shown interest in his philanthropic schemes forsook him" (Green, 1914, p. 26). The hardest blow for Pestalozzi, though, was the way his failure reflected on his education theories, which he felt that his experience at Neuhof had "discredited" (p. 26).

Without the farm and the school, Pestalozzi put effort into raising his son[12] and putting his ideas into writing. He published a story, *Gertrude and Leonard*, in 1783. Like Rousseau's *Emile,* this story was a fictionalized narrative, but designed to communicate Pestalozzi's philosophy — especially his philosophy of education. The main character, Gertrude, is pictured as the idyllic wife and mother, guiding her family (and her whole village, really) toward wisdom, virtue, and betterment. For the purposes of this dissertation, the works of Pestalozzi will be

[12] Interesting note: Pestalozzi named his son Jean-Jacques in honor of Rousseau. He also took Rousseau's *Emile* quite literally in raising his son. He oversaw Jean-Jacques's education, keeping him removed from societal influences and letting natural inquiry be the primary mechanism of schooling.

boiled down to what they say about education. For many of his novels, Gertrude is seen as the ideal educator.

Pestalozzi wrote: “Except spinning, sewing, and the other household arts of which she is the master, Gertrude knows little beyond the beginnings of drawing and writing, and nothing at all of what may be called technical education” (as cited in Green, 1914, p. 31). Yet Gertrude is able to craft for her children a robust education. Their education consists of a mixture of labor (they work a cotton farm and spin the cotton into fabric, so each child contributes as they are able), household tasks like cooking and cleaning, learning the basics of reading, writing, and math, family conversations, and daily Bible stories. They learn numbers by counting everything: the steps across a room, the panes in a window, spools of thread. They learn math through comparison. They learned the science of fire-building and how to analyze weather patterns. They learn, from actual experience with real objects (logs for the fire, weaving thread into cloth) concepts like thin and wide, blunt and narrow. They learn how to measure ingredients as they cook and calculate angles as they build. They study the effects of salt on icy stones in the winter and compost on the soil in the spring. In all of this, Gertrude guides her children, but she only takes them as far as they are willing to go on their own. The result of this education is that “the children can measure exactly with their eyes; their hands are steady, their imagination is exercised on their Bible stories, and their feeling for the beautiful…was lofty and sound” (as cited in Green, p. 31).

Gertrude and Leonard was a success, even though it was read mostly as a novel rather than a treatise on education philosophy (Green, 1914). The notoriety Pestalozzi gained from the book unlocked opportunities. He still believed in his educational principles, but his experience at Neuhof had convinced him that he needed the resources of the state to run a school. Time and

literary success had been enough to reduce tensions between Pestalozzi and the government. In 1798, he moved to Stanz on a government appointment to run an orphanage (the children of Stanz had been orphaned by a recent invasion of French soldiers) (Pestalozzi, 1894). "As at Neuhof, his aim was to combine education with industry," but he no longer sought to create a viable business from the labor of the children (Green, 1914, p. 42). Rather, he infused education at the orphanage with the type of handiwork he idolized in his novels — basic home keeping and work projects to train the body and the mind.

The orphanage at Stanz was short-lived, however. War had broken out again and the French army needed the building as a makeshift hospital (Pestalozzi, 1894). From Stanz, he moved to Burgdorf to oversee a boy's boarding school. From there he would move to Yverdon, where he ran an institute for twenty years. These appointments provided Pestalozzi opportunities to experiment with his educational philosophy (though each place had its share of difficulties and detractors). He had gleaned much from Rousseau's philosophy, but where Rousseau had been focused on educating an individual, Pestalozzi sought to modify Rousseau's ideas for group instruction.[13]

Green (1914) quotes from a government report detailing an official observation issued during Pestalozzi's time at Burgdorf (this is a long quote, but provides insight into Pestalozzi's pedagogy):

> There is no trace of memory drill. Everything which the child learns is the result of his own observation, of his own experience. He learns nothing which he does not understand,

[13] Pestalozzi's later life, especially his time at Burgdorf and Yverdon will be glossed over here. This span of decades was his most influential in terms of building and sharing his education theory. These experiences are worth more attention than can be spent on them in this brief section but interested readers should investigate more. See Silber (1973) for an introduction into the life and works of Pestalozzi. Green (1914) is also a good source, but his work is more of a hagiography than honest biography.

> he understands everything which he learns. In the lower classes the chief exercises deal with observation and naming. The boys are led to notice first the objects in the room, then they go over the whole house, observing and naming everything. When this source is exhausted they are taken into the garden, into the fields, and the woods, gradually accumulating a large stock of mental pictures and names. The children are then led to notice the objects in greater detail, their situation and the relations of their parts, their permanent and changeable qualities, the qualities that are general and those that are peculiar to them…Thus they pass from simple to complex ideas, from mental images and names to judgments, descriptions, conclusions — in one word, to the definite and intelligent use of language. They understand what they say, and they say what they understand. (pp. 52-53)

Of course, there are elements in this pedagogy that are *other*-directed. The teacher is guiding the practice of the pupils, leading them to name and understand the world around them. As semi-structured whole group instruction, it is not as self-directed as Rousseau's *Emile*, which left the individual alone to initiate all learning activity.[14] Embedded in this approach, though, is a respect for the learner as individual first and foremost. Education is built from the ground up, starting with what is of immediate use to the learner and slowly growing as the individual's own world and knowledge base grows. Pestalozzi wrote that "all educative instruction must be drawn out of the children themselves, and be born within them" (1894, p. 17).

[14] Pestalozzi also introduced classroom practices like giving students slate and chalk for drawing/note-taking and call-and-response type lectures. These have become ubiquitous in modern education and are very *other*-directed forms of instruction. Pestalozzi, though, envisioned these practices as a way to make whole group education *communal* and elicit participation from all students. This was a way to have learners share their work, opinions, and ideas, instead of just listening to a teacher lecture ad nauseum.

Perhaps the most enduring tenet of Pestalozzi's theory of education is the idea of *Anshauung*. This German word can be translated as "intuition" or "sense awareness" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). For Pestalozzi, it was deeply tied to observation — to *seeing* an object, not just by passively looking at it, but by taking it in with all senses. Pestalozzi believed "that *actual sensory experience, carefully organized and systematically worked out* is the only sound basis for instruction" (Green, 1914, p. 94, italics in original). To Pestalozzi, knowledge does not primarily come through books or lectures, but sensory experience with objects in the world. This idea is an echo of Aristotle, that experience with particular objects is the way to build knowledge of universals. This idea of *Anshauung* would go on to influence education theorists for centuries to come, starting with a protégé of Pestalozzi's: Friedrich Froebel.

Froebel is best known for originating kindergarten and forwarding the idea of "play-based" education. However, Froebel's education philosophy first must be understood as it relates to the inner work of an individual. Froebel's philosophy of education was grounded in his theology. God was the creator of all, and each person was bestowed with the gift of intellect and rationality so they could come to know God. For Froebel, this was the starting place of education. "Education consists in leading a man [sic], as a thinking intelligent being, growing into self-consciousness, to a pure and unsullied, conscious and free representation of the inner law of Divine Unity," he wrote in *The Education of Man*, perhaps his most influential text on education (1903, p. 2). Divine Unity for Froebel was the thing that connected all things to God: "All things live and have their being in and through the Divine Unity, in and through God" (p. 2). The role of education, then, was to "bring to a man's [sic] consciousness" to clarity on this connection to the divine.

To do that, a person must grow in wisdom. “To be wise,” Froebel argued, “is the highest aim of man” (p. 4). Wisdom for Froebel was an ever-increasing clarity of this Divine Unity and the subsequent results that this clarity had on a person’s choices and behaviors. This wisdom cannot be forced from without. Froebel’s belief in the Divine Unity held that humans inherently possess connection to the divine (the *Imago Dei,* “image of God” as theologians call it). A person already possesses this connection to God, they just may be ignorant of its existence. They gain an increasing awareness of this connection through natural inquiry and self-reflection. This forms the bedrock of Froebel’s philosophy of education. He wrote: “Therefore, education in instruction and training…should necessarily be *passive, following* (only guarding and protecting), *not prescriptive, categorical, interfering*” (p. 7, italics in original). This comes rather close to Rousseau’s arguments for natural education.

Similar to Rousseau, Froebel believed that outside influence could be more harmful than beneficial. He we wrote that “all arbitrary (active), prescriptive and categorical, interfering education in instruction and training must, of necessity, annihilate, hinder, and destroy,” (p. 9). Trying to force wisdom externally on a person was more likely to impede their educational journey. Contrary to Rousseau, however, Froebel was not non-interventionist. He did not believe that a child should not be left completely to themselves to follow any passion they so choose, nor should errors go un-corrected. There is a role for an educator, but that role is subtle (passive and following, as Froebel put it). He uses agricultural metaphors to make his point. A winemaker may need to prune the grapevines in order to yield the best crop. Over-eager trimming, though, will cause more harm than good. Also, performing the same trimming to all vines (categorial and prescriptive, as Froebel said) will impede their growth. The skilled vinedresser knows how

"passively and attentively to follow the nature of the plant" (p. 9). As with grapes, argued Froebel, so to with people.

So, for Froebel, self-directed learning is required for people to grow in their knowledge of the Divine Unity that binds all things to God: "the eternal divine principal as such demands and requires free self-activity and self-determination on the part of man [sic], being created for freedom in the image of God" (p. 11). This notion of freedom as a divine gift bestowed upon humans created in the image of God frames the way Froebel presents his most influential pedagogy: playing as learning.

Froebel has quite a high view of the play of children. He argued:

> Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man [sic] at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole — of the hidden inner natural life in man [sic] and all things. It gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the sources of all that is good…The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life; for the whole man [sic] is developed and shown in these…" (pp. 54-55)

Play is something sacred in Froebel's education philosophy, a vital connection to the Divine Unity. It is a way of moving out to the exterior the things a person already possesses in their inner life — freedom, joy, creativity, and contentment.

Froebel's love of the notion of childhood is all the more interesting in the light of his own childhood experiences. He was not even a year old before the death of his mother (Manning, 2005). His father, a Lutheran pastor, was by all accounts not a warm personality, raising his son in a strict religious upbringing that left little room for play and imagination. Froebel described his own childhood — with a lack of a nurturing mother and a strict, removed father — as

"painful" (1906, pp. xi-xii). Froebel's father thought young Friedrich too weak and dimwitted for the boys' school (which focused on academic rigor) and opted to send him to the girls' school instead (which infused more play and home occupations into learning). His father died when Friedrich was a teenager, and he traveled to Frankfurt to study architecture. In Frankfurt, he encountered the education philosophy of Johann Pestalozzi, which so appealed to Friedrich that he eventually went to study with Pestalozzi at Yverdon and ended up founding his own school to test his emerging theories about play-based education.

This was the foundation of what would be the Kindergarten ("children's garden") Movement in Germany, which was a confluence of his own childhood experiences and his forming pedagogy:

> Froebel saw his Kindergarten as a sanctuary for young children. It was used to both help them prepare and to protect them from the regimentation they would soon face in school. Froebel's lack of a loving maternal figure, combined with a strict, cold but religious father and an adoption of German Romanticism all contributed to his concept of Kindergarten. (Manning, 2005, p. 372)

In his Kindergarten, Froebel infused the religious zeal he gleaned from his father, the songs and dances he learned from the girls' school he attended as a child, and a sense of playfulness throughout. The educator was envisioned in Froebel's model as a nurturing figure (perhaps due to his own lack of a mother figure), and he "advocated that women had an important and natural role to play in the education of young children…[and] argued that they should be trained as teachers, an unprecedented idea at the time" (Manning, 2005, p. 372).

Another of Froebel's influential contributions to childhood education was the concept of using physical objects in instruction. Using his training in design and architecture, Froebel

designed and manufactured these manipulatives himself. Froebel called these items "gifts," and they became a core feature of his Kindergarten model (Wiggins & Smith, 1895). These objects were made out of wood in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and colors. Children were encouraged to play with and explore these items on their own, which in and of itself was not novel to childhood education. What was innovative in Froebel's approach, however, was the intentionality with which Froebel designed the manipulatives to work in learning other concepts. The child plays and gains familiarity with the gifts, and before too long, the educator can prompt the child, through the gifts, to compare and contrast objects, combine objects together to make larger wholes, calculate properties like perimeter, area, circumference, and gain experience with math operations like multiplication and division.[15]

The work of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel greaty influenced education philosophy in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. It has been shown how the theory of each influenced their successor (Rousseau influenced Pestalozzi who influenced Froebel). Also, highlighted in each person's history is the severe response they received from authorities (Froebel's pedagogy was at times seen as too socialist, leading to a temporary ban on Kindergartens from Prussian authorities). An education which encouraged free inquiry and critical thinking of the individual limited control of external authorities and was a threat to those in power. So, even though these philosophies would influence progressive educators for decades to come, they were also met with counterforces that propelled contrary views of education that saw the purpose of schools as places to instill order, efficiency, compliance, and the skills required for the contemporary workforce. That is quite a different view of education than Rousseau's learning by nature,

[15] Interesting historical note: Froebel's gifts were later manufactured by Milton-Bradley Company, creating a market for "educational" toys. This type of commercialization and commodification was exactly the type of educational approach that Froebel argued against. For more on this development, see Hewes, 1990.

Pestalozzi's learning by *Anshauung*, or Froebel's learning by play. Also emerging between these theorists is an internal tension: is education a project of the individual or a group? Does it have as its aim individual flourishing (Rousseau) or social uplift (Pestalozzi)? To examine these larger conflicts in education theory and the emerging rifts within these learner-centric pedagogies, it is time to turn attention from Europe to the United States.

Horace Mann: Common Schools for the Common Good

Guglielmino, Long, and Hiemstra (2004) argued that the founding of the United States, with its mythos as a land of opportunity built on self-reliance and individualism, "created a fertile climate for the promotion of self-directed learning" (p. 1). At first, this self-directedness was tied to the survival of settler communities. This learning-as-survivalism permeated pioneer ideology and western expansion, but "broader interest in education for self-improvement began to flourish in the larger and wealthier eastern cities" (p. 1-2).

Books were expensive commodities, and Wright (1957) argued that though colonists tended to buy texts that had practical value, like help with farming, medicine, or legal issues, that many early Americans collected books out of a "zeal to perpetuate learning, to keep alive the desire for knowledge, and to provide the instruments of self- instruction" (p. 129). Huey Long (1980) surveyed newspapers from the 18th century and found a large interest in educational pursuits outside of formal schooling. This led to the establishment of reading rooms and learning organizations like lyceums. Barnard (1838) wrote that:

> Lyceums are associations formed for the mutual improvement of their members and the common benefit of society. Their members meet on frank, cordial, and equal grounds. All declare, by joining a lyceum, that they wish to extend their knowledge; and from the

> manner in which they associate each may become, by turns, a learner and a teacher. (p. 40)

These associations, though communal, featured many characteristics of self-directed learning. Muhammad (2012) analyzed the history of literary societies and lyceums organized in Black communities in northeastern cities in the 1800s. The goal of these organizations, she argued, was "developing something called *literary character*…the personal and academic characteristics of a person that develop as a result of reading, writing, and speaking" (p. 7, italics in original). She goes on:

> Literary character has also been defined as being endowed with morality, self-discipline, intellectual curiosity, civic responsibility, and being able to use reason, self-expression, eloquence, and agency through literacy activities. In many ways, acquiring literary character was the ultimate goal and therefore meant that African Americans were able to conquer injustice and learn the skills necessary to protect their existence. (p. 7)

These organizations provided Black communities what formal school could not (or would not): agency and the freedom to pursue their own flourishing, both for themselves and for their communities.

Guglielmino, Long, and Hiemstra (2004) wrote that "between the American Revolution and the Civil War, the notion that an enlightened citizenry was essential for the functioning of a democratic society became firmly established" (p. 3). They point to the establishment of organizations like the YMCA and YWCA (Young Men's/Women's Christian Association), agricultural groups like the Grange, the proliferation of museums, libraries, and theatres, and numerous women's clubs and religious groups.

Perhaps no figure was as influential in this era of education philosophy than Horace Mann. Historian Ellwood Cubberley (1919) wrote this of Mann in his tome *Public Education in the United States*:

> No one did more than he to establish in the minds of the American people the conception that education should be universal, non-sectarian, free, and that its aims should be social efficiency, civic virtue, and character, rather than mere learning or the advancement of sectarian ends. (p. 126)

Mann was born the son of a farmer. Instead of formal education, Mann taught himself using resources of the Franklin Public Library, the first public library in the United States (Tarbell, 1900). He would go on to graduate as valedictorian from Brown University, attend law school, and serve in the Massachusetts legislature. In 1837, Mann was appointed secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. He visited every school in the state to see education in action and began a statewide campaign for "common schools" (Mann, 1891). Common schools were early iterations of public elementary schools. As already mentioned, up to this point schools in New England were religious in nature, geared at training children in morality and Biblical literacy (Small, 2013). Mann had traveled to Prussia, where state-run primary schools had been in place for a century. Interestingly enough, the King of Prussia sent representatives to observe Pestalozzi's school in the early 1800s, and later the Prussian education system adopted Froebel's model of the Kindergarten (after initially banning it) (Cubberley, 1920). Mann was inspired to bring such schools to the U.S. He believed that tuition-free, secular education was crucial in creating a flourishing democracy, that it would break down barriers between socio-economic classes and lead to a more free and fair society. In his 12th Annual Report, Mann famously made the claim that education was the "great equalizer":

> Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin is the great equalizer of the conditions of men…It does better than disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents being poor…The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society. (Massachusetts Board of Education, 1849, pp. 59-60)

Mann used his annual reports to the Board of Education not just to give updates on the state of schooling in Massachusetts, but to continue to build his case for wider acceptance of common schools. He also founded *The Common School Journal* to continue his campaign (Mann, 1891). Mann championed the spread of *normal schools* to train teachers and became a vocal proponent of the feminization of the teaching profession, as he saw women as naturally nurturing, motherly figures suited to the task of teaching (Groen, 2008).

It would be a stretch to call Mann a proponent of *self-directed learning*, though he did exemplify the traits of SDL in his own education. Indeed, perhaps no other historical figure played a larger role in moving education in the U.S. toward a large, collective, standardized, *other*-directed system and away from local, independent places of learning than Horace Mann. Still, Mann's argument for common schools as a way toward democratic flourishing would go on to greatly influence 20th century reformers like John Dewey. Whereas Rousseau holds space in the history of education philosophy for his focus on the individual, Mann is remembered for putting forward a vision of education that had as its aim societal betterment.

The Chautauqua Movement

In 1874, a Methodist minister partnered with a businessman to launch a type of educational summer camp on the shores of Chautauqua Lake, New York (Rieser, 2003). They named their camp The Chautauqua Institute, sometimes referred to as the *Mother* Chautauqua as small, independent *daughter* Chautuaquas began to spread around the United States. The experience was a multi-week hodgepodge involving lectures from a variety of speakers, reading circles, religious instruction, art, and music. The Chautauqua Movement of the late 19th century in some way built upon the lyceums of the previous century, and in some ways foreshadows events like TED Talks that gained momentum in the 21st century (TED stands for Technology, Education, and Design and these talks are popular presentations on innovations across a variety of fields). But where did The Chautauqua Movement come from and in what ways did it influence educational discourse (especially around SDL) in the 20th century?

Scott (1999) argued that the Chautauqua movement "was part of an American tradition of popular self-improvement…[which] dates back to Benjamin Franklin and extends forward to the community college of today" (p. 390). This movement emerged from the 18th century lyceums and literacy societies that were briefly surveyed in the previous section. The Chautauqua Institute was launched by Reverend John Vincent and a wealthy layman in his congregation, Lewis Miller, as a sort of Methodist training institute for Sunday School teachers (Scott, 1999). Soon, the course offerings expanded beyond the biblical or religious studies, and by the early 20th century thousands of attendees were flocking to the shores of Lake Chautauqua for this summer school experience (Tapia, 1997).

The heart of Chautauqua, at least for its founders, was to energize "popular education," the idea that knowledge should be equally accessible to all (neither Vincent nor Miller were

college educated) (Scott, 1999). So, Chautauqua "acted as an autonomous, private, nonprofit institution to democratize higher learning — with virtually no government control of involvement — yet still within the Jeffersonian spirit of expanding higher education" (Scott, 1999, p. 391). The institute gained national press in 1875 when sitting President Ulysses Grant gave a speech; he would be followed by six other presidents over the years (Scott, 1999). Chautauqua prided itself on the freedom of speech, and it quickly became a place where opposing political ideologies and social movements of the later 19th and early 20th centuries sparred on an annual basis. Politicians, scientists, and entertainers, and the top minds in their fields would offer lectures, workshops, or weeks-long courses (Johann Sebastian Bach taught a course in music at one of the summer institutes) (Scott, 1999, p. 392).

Chautauqua revealed an appetite among the American public for higher education opportunities. After the launch of the *mother* Chautauqua in New York, *daughter* Chautauquas soon emerged across the U.S. (over 290 existed at point or another) (Scott, 1999). These daughter institutions were independent and varied greatly on the courses offered and structure of the institute. They soon saw a decline due primarily to the Circuit Chautauqua. This was a traveling institute that often booked many of the same speakers and entertainers of the Mother Chautauqua in New York and toured throughout the country. Local Chautauquas struggled to compete with the circuit, as it often brought bigger names and more entertainment value at a cheaper cost (Scott, 1999).

Malcolm Knowles (1977) credits the Chautauqua Movement as the first nationally organized adult education movement. The Chautauqua Institute (later re-branded as Chautauqua University) also become the first institute of higher education to offer correspondence courses (Scott, 1999). This adult education movement added fuel to the public library movement of the

early 20th century (Blazek, 1987). The Chautauqua Movement began to fade as universities began to implement similar strategies (offering summer classes, correspondence courses, guest lecturers, etc.). Notably, William Rainey Harper went from directing Chautauqua University to becoming president of the University of Chicago. There, he set out to accomplish his "Chicago Plan," which envisioned a University Proper, University Extensions, a University Press, University Libraries, Laboratories, and Museums, and University Affiliations (Goodspeed, 1916, pp. 136-137). Harper broke the school year into quarters, including a summer quarter, based on his experience at Chautauqua, Chicago became the first university in America to offer evening courses, and the university built upon Chautauqua's correspondence courses by creating course offerings available to a global audience (Gould, 1961). Harper was also influential in inviting John Dewey to the University of Chicago and was supportive of Dewey establishing a laboratory school to test his pedagogies and train educators — a move which will be explored in a later section.

W.E.B. Du Bois — The Mountain to Climb

Writing nearly two decades after the surrender of the Confederate forces brought an end to the Civil War and emancipation to enslaved Blacks in southern U.S. States, Du Bois (1903/2018) interrogated the era of Reconstruction as an age of failed promise. The 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1869, offered Black men access to the ballot box and a path to political power. Forces of resistance in the forms of voter-suppression laws and policies, though, pushed back against this progress. Du Bois (1903/2018) observed: "A million black men started with renewed zeal to vote themselves into the kingdom. So the decade flew away, the revolution of 1876 came, and left the half-free serf weary, wondering, but still inspired," (p. 12). This inspiration turned to disillusionment as Jim Crowe laws, lynchings with

impunity, and other forms of white terror defeated any real chance for Black political power in the south.

Since the ballot box had failed to offer Black men free and fair access to political power, Du Bois (1903/2018) argued that a new vision was required:

> Slowly but steadily, in the following years, a new vision began gradually to replace the dream of political power—a powerful movement, the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided, another pillar of fire by night after a clouded day. It was the ideal of "book-learning"; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. (p. 12)

The way forward was through education. Du Bois (1972) viewed education as a "drawing out of human powers" (p. 7). It is not an easy path forward, nor is the direction entirely clear. Du Bois (1903/2018) described it as an arduous and difficult climb. An extended quote is presented here, as it showcases the foundation of Du Bois's philosophy of education:

> To the tired climbers, the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, the Canaan was always dim and far away. If, however, the vistas disclosed as yet no goal, no resting-place, little but flattery and criticism, the journey at least gave leisure for reflection and self-examination; it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those sombre forests of his [sic] striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. (p. 12)

This process —growing in self-consciousness, self-realization, and self-respect — was the goal of education for Du Bois.

In order for that education to be authentic, Du Bois (1968) argued for Africana education — an educational approach that sought to equip people of African descent with the knowledge of "the part that Africa has played in world history" (p. 228). Rabaka (2003) argued that there were three essential components of Du Bois's education philosophy: a critical knowledge of African and world history, critical cultural inquiry, and an "understanding of present and future vital needs of not only continental and diasporan Africans, but also of humanity as a whole" (p. 400). Du Bois (1997) argued that Africana education "cannot begin with history and lead to Negro history. It cannot start with sociology and end with Negro sociology," (p. 418). Instead, Africana education had a different starting point, a different focus, as it aimed to equip Black people with a critical knowledge of their history, present social conditions, and articulations of the future. Just as a Spanish university "starts with Spanish history and makes conditions in Spain the starting point of its teaching," Africana education "begins with Negroes" and has as its foundation "a knowledge of the history of their people in Africa and in the United States, and their present condition," (Du Bois, 1997, p. 416).

Du Bois is an important figure in the history of SDL. A primary reason is the way that Du Bois centers the *self* in his education philosophy. For Du Bois, Africana education was crucial in restoring notions of personhood to a people whose histories had been so violently attacked. Du Bois (1973) wrote: "To kidnap a nation; to transplant it in a new land, to a new language, new climate, new economic organization, a new religion and new moral customs…is a tremendous wrenching of social adjustments," (p. 33). This complete, utter, and violent dislocation of people groups from a variety of African contexts and into a variety of enslaved settings in North and South America for generations created a society that was "wrenched, torn, and revolutionized" (p. 33). Before a person can be self-directed, their sense of self must be restored. This was part of

Du Bois's philosophy — to center Africana education in the history and experiences of continental and diasporan Africans. That history provided the starting point for Africana education.

Another connection to SDL can be glimpsed in Du Bois quote used above, primarily that Black education during the period of Reconstruction was driven by "the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know," (1903/2018, p. 12). This view of curiosity and "the longing to know" is a direct tie back to Aristotle, whose view of innate curiosity served as the starting point for this history of SDL. This curiosity to the know the world and one's place in it leads an individual to "dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect" (p. 12). Du Bois was not presenting Africana education as a type of compulsory education, positioning it as an answer for the "compulsory ignorance" imposed on Black Americans for generations. Rather, Du Bois's education philosophy was a way of satiating the deeper longings of the soul, a process of emancipation that restored agency and initiative in Black Americans through a critical examination of history, culture, current issues, and dreams of the future. This is similar to the Aristotelian notion of natural curiosity examined at the beginning of this chapter but is unique to the experiences of continental and diasporan Africans.

Dewey, Montessori, and Progressive Reformers

The 20th century saw the rise of progressive reformers in educational discourse, so labeled because they critiqued the *why* and *how* of schooling and argued for education to be reimagined into something better. Perhaps the two most prominent figures of this era were John Dewey and Maria Montessori. John Dewey (1916/1944) viewed education as a "fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating process" (p. 10). Arguing against the psychological conditioning gaining

momentum in education via the work of Edward Thorndike (1917), Dewey wrote that the student "is simply played upon to secure habits which are useful. He is trained like an animal rather than educated like a human being," (1916/1944, p. 13). For Dewey, education occurred as a person interacted with, experienced, and made meaning of the world around them. Dewey, in an echo of Rousseau, argued against the imposition of rules ran contra to human nature:

> While the customs and rules of adults furnish stimuli which direct as well as evoke the activities of the young, the young, after all, participate in the direction where their actions finally take. In the strict sense, nothing can be forced upon them or into them. To overlook this fact means to distort and pervert human nature. (p. 25)

Contrary to Rousseau, however, Dewey did not think that this learning happened in isolation, that, if left alone, a child would come into full maturity of their faculties. He used language learning as an example. "Taken literally, Rousseau's principle [that an adult should not teach or correct a pupil] would mean that adults should accept and repeat the babblings and noises of children," he argued (p. 114). He agreed that children do possess, naturally, everything they need to acquire language, but thought that "it is absurd to suppose that these have an independent growth of their own, which left to itself would evolve a perfect speech," (p. 114).

A key difference, then, between Rousseau and Dewey is the role that the teacher plays in education. This difference can first be glimpsed in how each philosopher presents the *why* — the necessity — of education. Rousseau (1762/1889) saw education in an individual light, writing of his pupil: "How to live is the business I wish to teach him. On leaving my hands he will not, I admit, be a magistrate, a soldier, or a priest; first of all he will be a man [sic]," (pp. 13-14). The goal of education, for Rousseau, was individual flourishing or happiness, and, as argued earlier, this could only come to full fruition by nature, without the perverting influences of society.

Dewey (1916/1944), on the other hand, argued that "the primary ineluctable facts of the birth and death of each one of the constituent members of a social group determine the necessity of education," (p. 3). Education, in Dewey's thought, is required for the survival of society. It is not enough for education to be an individual project. "Mere physical growing up," Dewey argued, contra to Rousseau, "mere mastery of the bare necessities of subsistence will not suffice to reproduce the life of the group," (p. 3). Because education is a *social* necessity, then, it is up to society to constantly evaluate its methods of education in order to determine whether or not the values and skills needed for a "common life" are being cultivated (p. 7). The guiding principle for Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, then, is engaging in just that sort of evaluation.

Since Rousseau and Dewey had drastically different reasons for education, it follows that they had different conceptualizations of the role of the teacher. For Rousseau, there was no greater teacher than nature itself. The pupil was best left alone to observe and experiment. The role of the teacher was to give space for this exploration to occur and to refrain from interfering in the natural process as much as possible. Dewey envisioned a more active role for the teacher, whose primary goal was to intentionally design spaces to cultivate educative experiences. "We never educate directly," Dewey argued, "but indirectly by means of the environment," (p. 19). The teacher, then, provided stimulating experiences, thoughtfully designed the environment, and posed problems to the learner. If the learner struggled to solve the problem, that did not mean that the teacher was to "stand off and look on," but rather was to step into the experience with the learner and participate, entering into what Dewey envisioned as a reciprocal relationship where "the teacher is a learner and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher" (p. 160).

So, whereas both Rousseau and Dewey agreed with Aristotle's premise that man is by nature inquisitive, and both agreed that experience with real things in the real world is the

substance of knowledge, they differed on the *why* and *how* of education. Rousseau envisioned education as *for oneself* and, therefore, best achieved individually, in isolation. Dewey argued that education was needed for society to renew itself, to transmit the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to maintain community life to each new generation. "The conclusion," argued Dewey, against Rousseau, is not education "apart from the environment, but to provide an environment in which native powers [natural abilities] will be put to better uses," (p. 118).

Dewey put his educational philosophy into practice at the University of Chicago's Laboratory School (Boyles, 2020; Knoll, 2014; Mayhew & Edwards, 1937; Tanner, 1997).[16] Dewey was involved in the school from 1894-1903 and envisioned a school that cultivated deep thinking by posing practical problems. Dewey's school was deeply influenced by his own childhood experiences in which he felt like his out of school experiences were richer, more educative, than the humdrum rote memorization of facts he experienced in school (Tanner, 1997). Dewey (1896) wrote that "education outside the school proceeds almost wholly through participation in the social or community life of which one is a member" (p. 418). So, Dewey's laboratory school was established with this basic idea of *community participation* in mind: children would solve real problems together and learn as they went. Michael Knoll (2014) observed that:

> Instead of beginning with reading, writing, arithmetic as is traditionally done, the lessons at the Laboratory School concentrated from the start on topics and issues pertaining to actual life and the meeting basic human needs like food, clothing, and shelter. (p. 456).

[16] Dewey was invited by University President William Rainey Harper, who previously served as president of Chautauqua University and was supportive of setting up "laboratories" at the university to test emerging hypotheses. It is unlikely the lab school would have existed without Harper's support (though eventually the school closed due to Harper's decisions).

Students at the laboratory school would engage with practical skills, like cooking, gardening, and sewing, that were necessary for community life. The traditional skills of school would be taught within these larger problem-based projects. For instance, if a child could not read the recipe or did not know how to measure the ingredients, then the teacher would provide extra guidance and support to teach those skills *within* the larger project of baking bread.

Katherine Mayhew and Anna Edwards (1936) were two of the teachers at the lab school and chronicled their experiences in *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903.* They wrote that because of the experimental nature of the school, the curriculum remained dynamic, always evolving and adapting. They had two guiding principles for their education design:

1. "First, in all educative relationships the starting point is the impulse of the child to action, his desire responding to the surrounding stimuli and seeking its expression in concrete form" (p. 23).
2. Provide the materials and the boundaries ("the let and the hindrance" as the authors put it) and let the exploration proceed its natural course (p. 23).

These principles fit within the definition of SDL presented in Chapter One. It is the *learner's initiative* that serves as the stating place for the learning project, though external stimuli are provided by the teacher and the environment. The learner also has some agency in the course the learning takes, within boundaries negotiated by the teachers.

Mayhew and Edwards (1937) chronicled the eight-year run of the school in detail. They divided the school's history into two phases. The "first period" was 1896-1898, when the school was in its infancy and all education design was intentionally experimental — testing the pedagogical hypotheses of Dewey and the educators at the school (p. 39). The first months and

years of the school, then, were largely trial-and-error. In reflecting on this experience, the teachers write that this early period "was largely revealing in what not to do" (pp. 41-42). The "second period" of the school lasted from 1898 to the school's closing in 1904 and was a time for educators to revise and implement what proved successful in the first period (p. 39).

Dewey's laboratory school had a troubled existence. It was founded under the Department of Philosophy, Psychology, and Education at the University of Chicago and subject to the whims and politics of university administration. It was chronically under-funded. Mayhew and Edwards (1937) note that the school was given $1,000 at its founding — not in cash, but in tuition remission for graduate students who taught at the school. Parents and supporters helped cover the operating cost of the school. In 1902, the Chicago Institute merged with the University of Chicago. The Institute had its own teacher training program and its own elementary school as well. The Institute's school was endowed, while the lab school continually found itself in debt. The decision was made by the university administration to merge the schools under the banner of the lab school. This was easier said than done, as the "two schools differed rather widely in theory, method, and practice" (p. 13).

Parents and staff of the lab school revolted. The university relented. The schools would remain separate, but the lab school would need to start chipping in to pay for facilities to the tune of $5,000 per year. The amount was raised through a funding campaign driven by parents and supporters and the lab school operated under its current leadership for another year. The victory was short-lived, however, as the university moved forward with its plans to merge the schools the following year. Dewey still oversaw the school, his wife Alice served as principal, and they retained the school's teachers.

Things fell apart, though, in the spring of 1904. Alice Dewey was forced out as principal. Some of the teachers at the lab school were dismissed without John Dewey's knowledge. He resigned out of protest, leaving the University of Chicago for Columbia University. The eight-year experiment of Dewey's laboratory school came to an end primarily as a result of the mismanagement of the university administration.

That is not to say that the school had everything figured out (it was a lab school after all). It became difficult to train teachers to implement Dewey's pedagogy, who would, little by little, began to revert back to traditional approaches to teaching. Parents sometimes complained that their children would learn hobbies and crafts at school and learn basic academics at home (though Mayhew and Edwards also noted that the parents were also the school's biggest supporters). Were Dewey's ideals impractical in a real school environment, or did the struggles of the laboratory school stem more from a combination of uncommitted parents, conflicting administration, ill-equipped teachers, the experimental nature of the school, and a hard-to-shake dependence on traditional views of education? Dewey's school was definitely distinct and worthy of further study. In fact, future chapters in the dissertation will circle back to Dewey's lab school to reflect on how the lab school can inform current school design. Dewey's model, though, was not the only school model at the dawn of the 20th century centering the interests and passions of the learners.

Like Dewey, Maria Montessori (1912) was reacting against theories of education that claimed to be *scientific* in nature, shaped by the efficiency logic of factory floors. She was also intentionally in conversation with Rousseau, whom, she argued, had "given voice to impracticable principles and vague aspirations for the liberty of the child, [while] the true concept of liberty is practically unknown to educators," (p. 15). Montessori's first task was to

highlight what she perceived as the failures of the current school model. She argued that the role of the teacher in the traditional classroom, instead of educating, was to "pour certain cut and dried facts into the heads of scholars," and that "in order to succeed in this barren task, she finds it necessary to discipline her pupils into immobility and force their attention," (p. 21). Schooling, then, in the way Montessori saw being practiced, was about as far removed from the notion of *liberty* as possible.

Through her work at the *Casa dei Bambini* (usually translated as "Children's House"), Montessori sought to accomplish two things. The first was a trial for a new type of preschool model in Rome that would provide an "infant school" in every tenement building (at the time there were over 400 tenement buildings in the city), offering preschool education to each family in the building (pp. 45-46). The second, similar to Dewey's school, was to provide a type of laboratory for Montessori to experiment with new pedagogical approaches.

Similar to Dewey, Montessori saw the first role of the teacher as tending to the environment of the classroom. She removed the heavy, industrial desks and chairs that, in her mind, immobilized learners, and opted instead for small tables that children could move as needed. The environment of Montessori's classroom was made to fit the child. The furniture was child sized, the materials were placed at a child's level, and children had freedom to move about the space to follow their interests.

Once the environment was established, the primary role of the teacher in Montessori's pedagogy was *observer*. She wrote that:

> In our system, she [the teacher] must become a passive, much more than an active, influence, and her passivity shall be composed of anxious scientific curiosity, and of absolute *respect* for the phenomenon which she wishes to observe. The teacher must

> understand and *feel* her position of *observer*: the *activity* must lie in the *phenomenon*. (p. 87, italics in original)

The teacher, in Montessori's imagining, is first and foremost an anthropologist, an ethnographer, seeking to understand the reality of her classroom by blending into the environment, observing the work and wonderings of the children in her care.

She likens children to flowers who are naturally inclined to bloom, and who will, unless their growth is suffocated or suppressed, unfold naturally toward "life itself," (p. 88).[17] Though this may seem like a sentiment straight from Rousseau, Montessori has a different concept of what is meant by *liberty* and *education*. The act of observation is the teacher's first act of education, but it is just the beginning. For Montessori, the purpose of education was a *purposeful* and *intentional* cultivation of the child towards growth and maturity. To continue with the flower metaphor: the teacher is a gardener and each child is a different type of flower. The teacher must first observe so that they know what kind of flower they are cultivating and what the prime conditions are for its growth. Then, they can begin to direct its movement and help it overcome the obstacles that hinder its growth. "An educational method that shall have *liberty* as its basis," she argued, "must intervene to help the child to a conquest of these various obstacles," (p. 95, italics in original). This idea is a clear break with Rousseau's non-interventionism.

After *liberty*, Montessori saw the next purpose of education as *independence*. She wrote that the "first active manifestations of the child's liberty must be so guided that through this activity he may arrive at independence," (p. 96). The teacher, then, is there to direct the child's activity toward independence, which means only assisting a child with an activity (getting dressed, preparing food, etc.) if it is leading the child towards being able to accomplish the task

[17] Similar to Froebel's vinedresser metaphor on p. 47.

on their own. Any action by the teacher that is leading a child toward dependence — on the teacher, on parents, on the environment, or on others — is a hindrance in the natural development of the child. For Montessori, perhaps the greatest failing of traditional schools was that they were producing students who were *dependent* upon the structure of schooling and had little practice or experience with liberty. There was a need for educators who had as their focus the cultivation of a child's independence.

Martin (1992) argued that *Casa dei Bambini* should be translated as "Children's Home" rather than "Children's House." At first glance, the difference may seem minor. However, *home* and *house* are quite different concepts. The *casa* that Montessori had in mind was not just a location (a schoolhouse, so to say), but a sacred embodiment of *home*, where children felt safe, participated in domestic work together, and interacted as family. "Just as Montessori's model of school is an idealized version of home, an exemplary family serves as her model for the relationship those attending the school stand to one another…a special kind of love," Martin wrote (p. 14). The children were not just pupils and the teacher was not just some adult authority. They were connected by a family bond. This connection did not negate Montessori's individual, learner-centric approach to education. Martin argued, "even as the children were treated as individuals and their individuality was allowed to flourish, they felt connected to one another and concerned about one another's welfare" (p. 16). Because of this, even though Montessori's schools were located in the poorest tenements in Rome and were comprised of children who Montessori says were considered "ignorant little vandals" before the schools' inception, there were very few issues with behavior (as cited in Martin, p. 12). In fact, Martin notes that "reports of the unselfish behavior of the children in Montessori's schools and of their genuine concern for their schoolmates abound" (p. 16).

This focus on domesticity — on bringing the work (and more important the familial sense of safety and belonging) from home into school — was an important foundation in the education philosophy of both Dewey and Montessori. Mayhew and Edwards (1936) wrote that embedded in Dewey's laboratory school was "the idea of the school-house as a home in which the activities of social or community life were carried on" (p. 43). School was seen as organically connected to home life, not as a cold, distinct institution modeled on factory logic. The purpose of school, like the purpose of home, was to grow and learn. This learning and growing happens with and alongside of others (classmates, family members) as work is undertaken, inquiries are investigated, and problems are solved. Dewey and Montessori have much to say to and against systems of education that are increasingly depersonalized, standardized, and competitive instead of community-building.

Summerhill — "The Happiest School in the World"

Dewey and Montessori were not alone in their work. There are numerous examples of experimental school models that sought to develop a child's liberty, independence, and agency. One of the key exemplars of the 20th century is A.S. Neill's school at Summerhill. Summerhill was founded in 1921 in Suffolk, England and served as a type of boarding school for children ages five to sixteen. The school was founded by A. S. Neill (1960) and his wife, who wanted "*to make school fit the child* — instead of making the child fit the school," (p. 4, italics in original). The school started as an experimental school, similar to the laboratory schools of Dewey and Montessori. Neill argued that though it started as an experiment, "it is now a demonstration school, for it demonstrates that freedom works," (p. 4).

Neill, like Rousseau, believed that "a child is innately wise and realistic" and "if left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, he will develop as far as he is capable of

developing," (p. 4). Summerhill was built upon this belief, a type of Neverland that held whole-heartedly to the view that traditional education is a type of destructive force that crushes the goodness and creativity out of children. Summerhill was designed to be distinctly different. Neill wrote that the "newspapers call it a *Go-as-you-please School* and imply that it is a gathering of wild primitives who have no law and have no manners," (p. 3). There were teachers and lessons, but attendance was optional. No child was coerced into learning anything. There was no dress code, no room inspections. There was no central authority, but power was dispersed among the group. Every Saturday evening there would be a General School Meeting, where the rules of the school would be decided. Every child and staff member received one vote so that the vote of a five-year-old carried as much weight as that of the headmaster. This freedom, though, Neill argued did not "mean the abrogation of common sense," so the school still took such safety precautions as having adults supervise children while they swam and banned weapons from the campus (though Neill wrote that "these rules came from the children themselves, voted in a General School Meeting"), (p. 20).

Neill argued that the success of Summerhill can be witnessed in the children it graduates, the proof being in the pudding, so to speak. "My own criterion for success," he wrote, "is the *ability to work joyfully and live positively*. Under that definition, most pupils at Summerhill turn out to be successes in life," (p. 29, italics in original). It is up to the child to learn if and when they will learn to read or solve Algebraic equations. Their choices are determined by their interests, whether or not they will take the qualifying exams to attend college, and by the trades they are most interested in. It is possible to graduate Summerhill, as some pupils have, without attending a single lesson or learning how to read.

Emmanuel Bernstein (1968) offered a glimpse into the lives of Summerhill alumni. He was able to track down and interview fifty former students, which was apparently quite a task since the school did not keep extensive records. Through these interviews, he found that the trait of *tolerance,* "accepting people as they are, without regard to race, religion, or other label" was the "most typical of a Summerhillian," (p. 38). Out of the fifty former students, he identified ten that had "nothing but praise for Summerhill" because of the "free environment that helped them develop more complete personalities through following their natural bent," (p. 40). Seven of the fifty felt that Summerhill had actually been more harmful, mostly because of the "de-emphasis on academic subjects and the lack of good teachers," (p. 40).

From the interview data Bernstein collected, he argued that "a shorter stay seemed more beneficial than the completion of schooling at Summerhill," (p. 40). A stint at Summerhill seemed to be a sort of *detox period*, a time for children to shake off the shackles of force-fed education, reflect on their thoughts and interests, and prepare to actively engage in schooling. If students transferred from Summerhill to other schools, they tended to learn quicker than their peers. If, however, they stayed at Summerhill, there was a tendency to fall into a sort of lull, with little incentive, structure, or resources to make their passions or interests a reality. Bernstein believed, after his study, that Summerhill was successful in producing curious and productive learners. "Almost all the former students were working, raising responsible children, enjoying life," he observed (p. 70). However, Bernstein thought that the philosophy could be refined, with more focus on helping children gain success in their work. "A child cannot be interested in anything until he succeeds," He argued. "Then he can find interest in anything — even in

arithmetic," (p. 70). Summerhill is still in operation and continues to be a controversial approach to schooling.[18]

Sudbury Valley School — "Free at Last"

A similar school to Summerhill, Sudbury Valley School, was established in 1968 in Framingham, Massachusetts. Founder Daniel Greenberg (1987) wrote, "The idea is simple: driven by innate curiosity, which is the essence of human nature, children will make enormous exertions to explore and master the world around them," (p. xii). Similar to Rousseau and Aristotle before him, Greenberg believed that "innate curiosity" is the bedrock of all education. Humans possess a natural bent toward learning, and schools are more often obstacles in the paths of curious children than they are places that cultivate curiosity. So, Greenberg and others set to design a school in the Massachusetts countryside built on democratic governance and learner-driven education. Similar to Summerhill, the school is governed through a gathering called the School Meeting, where students and staff are equal, each having a vote. Distinct from Summerhill, though, is that the School Meeting decides more than rules, they have complete decision-making power over the organization — budgeting, staffing, discipline, and contract negotiations all are decided upon in the School Meeting (p. xii).

There are no required classes at the Sudbury Valley School. Greenberg wrote that "a class is an arrangement between two parties," (p. 8). A class is initiated by someone (or some ones) who wants to "learn something specific — say, Algebra, or French, or physics, or spelling, or pottery. A lot of times they figure it out on their own," (p. 8). In the instance that the person cannot find the resource to learn the subject on their own, they find someone to teach them. It

[18] Summerhill hosted a centennial celebration in 2021.

can be a fellow student or a hired teacher that works at the school. It is the responsibility of the student to initiate the class, find the teacher, and negotiate the terms of the class.

Like Summerhill, the founder of Sudbury Valley School pointed to the success of their graduates to gauge the effectiveness of the pedagogy. Greenberg wrote that any Sudbury Valley graduate that wanted to attend college was accepted, most to the college of their first choice (p. xxv). But college preparation was not the goal of the school. For example, one student took an interest in trumpet. He played for four to five hours a day, rarely attending other classes at school. He left Sudbury Valley, attended a conservatory, and became first horn of a major symphony orchestra (p. 12). Another wrinkle to Sudbury Valley that differed from A. S. Neill's project at Summerhill was the inclusion of apprenticeships. Students were free to (with the assistance of school staff) find *masters* in the community to apprentice with (once again, connecting the ideas of *learning as knowing* and *learning as doing*, which had been disassociated in traditional school discourse). It was on the student to negotiate terms with the master and uphold their end of the bargain. This opportunity allowed curious learners to delve deeper into work of interest, gain valuable experience, and build their professional networks.

Like Summerhill, there are no requirements for the learner at Sudbury Valley. Children are not forced (or even encouraged) to read by a certain age. Daniel Greenberg (1987) wrote about the experiences of his own children at the school. His oldest child learned to read when he was six out of natural curiosity. By the time his second child was nine, she still displayed little interest in reading. Family members and friends began to mutter. The philosophy of the school was questioned — who could allow a child to grow up illiterate without intervening? By the time the girl was nine-and-a-half, she could read just about anything she picked up (pp. 20-21). Greenberg argued that children learn to read the same way they learn speech, that when they are

"left to their own devices, they eventually see for themselves that in our world, the written word is a magic key to knowledge," (p. 23). Writing is handled the same way, picked up by the students when they feel so inclined.

In a study from Boston College, Peter Gray and David Chanoff (1986) interviewed graduates of the Sudbury Valley School. They wanted to know if such a school *could work* in preparing young people for the world, and if, in fact, it *did work*, why were educational policies moving in a direction opposite of student freedom? Since the researchers were interested in studying graduates of the school, they first had to set parameters around what is meant by *graduate*. How does one graduate from a school in which there are no requirements, grades, or exams? Each graduate must defend a thesis before the School Assembly, the topic is "essentially that the candidate is ready to take responsibility for himself or herself in the society at large," (p. 188). The defense can last up to two hours, and any in attendance can ask questions. Diplomas are conferred by a majority vote from the members of the School Assembly.

The authors of the study wrote that "by far the most common criticism of the [Sudbury Valley School] SVS philosophy is that children who are not compelled to do schoolwork will fail to acquire the knowledge, skills, and work habits needed for effective functioning in our complex society," (p. 190). So, they attempted to get in touch with every person who either: received a diploma from Sudbury Valley (78 people) or left Sudbury Valley after the age of 16 without a diploma and no plans for additional secondary schooling (four people). Their study focused on the years of 1970 (the year of the first graduates) to 1981 (the cutoff year for the study). They tracked down all 82 "graduates" and mailed them questionnaires. In addition to the questionnaires, they pursued phone interviews and in-person interviews with the participants. Out of the 82 graduates identified, 69 responded. They asked questions about the participants'

background information, their time at Sudbury Valley, and their college and career experiences since leaving.

This study was conducted against the backdrop of the *Nation at Risk* report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), which argued that the U.S. was falling behind in education (and, as result, economic output) to countries like Japan precisely because students did *too little* schoolwork in school. Gray and Chanoff (1986), however, concluded after their data analysis:

> We have outlined the experiences of a group of young adults who graduated from a school where no schoolwork was required and little (at least of the traditional sort) was done and where curricula, academic requirements, tests, and grades did not exist. Our principal conclusion is that these people, including both those who started the school early in their primary years and those who started in their secondary years, have not suffered as a result of attending such a school. They have gone on to good colleges and good jobs. They have become, or are clearly en route to becoming, productive members of society. (pp. 208-209)

The researchers do note some caveats, primarily in the background of the students. Those that attended Sudbury Valley School were typically from white, middle class families with college educated parents. Would these results look the same across a wider cross-section of American communities?

"Free Schools, Free People" — The Death of the Democratic Dream

Summerhill and the Sudbury Valley School are but two examples of the free school movement that climaxed in the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of the counterculture movement (Kozol, 1972). The movement declined during the Nixon administration as many of

the free schools failed to be financially solvent, a rise of conservatism shifted education policy, and in-fighting among the various philosophies within the movement slowed the radical zeal for alternative school models (Scott, 1999).

The free school movement has its roots in Danish Folk Schools of the mid-19th century (and of course, was influenced by the educational philosophers highlighted in this chapter, like Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Dewey). As Denmark transitioned to democracy, poet, philosopher, and theologian Nikolaj Frederik Severin (N.F.S.) Grundtvig imagined education as the mechanism for creating a new social reality without force or violence (Borish, 1991). This education would be local — grounded in the culture of small rural communities across Denmark. Stephen Borish (1991), a Grundtvig scholar, identified these tenets of the *folkehojskole* (usually translated as "folk high school"), which are paraphrased here from his larger work:

- The wholeness of the individual and an individual's identity is only experienced in the context of community.
- Oral cultures and traditions are central to education.
- The purpose of education is to meet the needs of the common people.
- Education is about *feeling*, first and foremost, not facts; so, learners must be given time to develop habits of mind and heart before learning academic skills.
- Education should consider the nature and needs of the learners.
- The government should have no control of the school; no tests, grades, or certificates should be given.

The Danish Folk Schools offered quite the opposite view of education than the increasingly popular industrialized schools of the 19th century that strove to standardize teaching and learning to the point of turning schools into a factory that produced standard learners. The folk schools

moved away from universals or standardization, instead focusing on the individual, guiding each learn to realize their own identity within their community and become self-sufficient, agentic, and democratically minded citizens.

Cubberley (1920) wrote:

> The achievements of the Danish rural schools would have been impossible without dropping the paraphernalia of standardization and supervision…Education in Denmark treats the teacher as a free person. It appeals to the best the instructors have to offer. It invites originality, research, stimulus and community activity, while in the United States these things are a dangerous quality for a teacher to possess…We denature our teachers then wonder why teaching is so bad. (p. 368)

So, Danish Folk Schools provided some inspiration, but the free school movement that emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s came about in a unique cultural context.

Miller (2002) argued in *Free Schools, Free People* that this movement was "distinguished from other alternative forms of education. Free school ideology was explicitly countercultural," (p. 3). By this, Miller means that the educators, pedagogues, and parents attracted to free schools were not just seeking an alternative to education but were driven by a particular set of goals and values that "rejected the defining institutions and practices of American society" (p. 3). Free schools were places that pushed back on the American mythology of capitalism, consumerism, and the authority of the state.

So, free schools were envisioned as "small educational communities that were free from state control and the values of corporate capitalism, personalistic enclaves in which every child, and every teacher, was free to think, dream, and engage" the world around them in ways authentic to themselves (p. 3). Though influenced by Deweyan pedagogy, the free school

movement was ultimately a rejection of Dewey's dream of public education as a maintainer of democracy. Miller argued that the free school movement "involved a cultural and political critique that recognized that schooling would not and *could not* be radically transformed" (p. 7, italics in original). The free school movement was not a reformation movement, a way to steer public education toward finally and fully being realized as a public good. Rather, as Resnick (1970) argued, "America had run out of dreams" (p. 3). The mythology of America as a land of opportunity had run dry in the collective imaginations of those in the free school movement.

According to Miller (2002), there were as many as 800 free schools established in the years between 1960-1972. The goal for this section will not be to catalogue individual schools, but rather to present as a type of summary of the education philosophies and pedagogies of the free school movement. That is not to say the movement was monolithic — it was not. Actually, the movement (though certainly met with formidable external opposition) was undercut by its own infighting due to diverse goals, directions, and dreams of those involved. Those differences will be highlighted as well. The hope is that a brief but helpful look at the free school movement will help articulate this shift in the history of SDL and ground the work of thinkers like Ivan Illich and John Holt, which will garner more attention later in this chapter.

Much of the ideology of the free school movement is in line with the education philosophies thus far presented. The first common ideology is an agreement with Aristotle (and Rousseau) that people are naturally curious and will naturally seek knowledge to satiate their curiosity. This ideology rises from "a particular conception of human nature — the belief that human beings are *naturally* inclined to grow and learn in healthy ways if not thwarted by oppressive or short-sighted social pressures" (Miller, 2002, p. 63, italics in original). An implication of this ideology, in free school pedagogy, is that education should not be

compulsory. Learning cannot be imposed by external force. Humans are natural learners, and therefore learning must be allowed to unfold through a natural process of choice. So, one connotation of *free* in free schools is the freedom of the individual, the freedom to learn and participate in learning as they see fit.

Another connotation of *free* is the idea of autonomy for the school itself. Free schools were free from government oversight or imposition and free from standardized curriculum. These schools were local and intentionally small, so that learners, parents, and educators had to navigate the community via personal, face to face interactions. These schools sought to divest themselves of hierarchal authority, instead seeking to be environments fully governed by participatory democracy (as at Summerhill and Sudbury Valley).

What perhaps differentiates the free school movement the most from similar schools that believed in learner autonomy (like Dewey's lab school) was the way these schools positioned themselves *against* public education. As already stated, public education in free school ideology was beyond saving. The dream of American democracy had died on the vine. According to Miller (2002), when freedom, opportunity, autonomy, and equality are "replaced by values of efficiency, rationality, standardization, and managerial expertise, then democracy has given way to *technocracy*," which is a "social order that maintains stability and control by fitting human 'resources' into appropriate, pre-defined institutional niches" (p. 10). The free school thinkers believed that social efficiency advocates like David Sneddon had already won the fight over the purpose of American education. Schools merely served as a sorting mechanism, sending human resources to meet industry needs. The free school movement was not aimed at restoring faith in education as a public good, but about reclaiming education from corporate and government control and placing it within bounded localities, each school democratically governing itself.

This was a revolutionary act, an attempt by disparate communities to wrangle control of schooling from the state and re-establish it in the hands of parents, educators, and learners.

So, what happened to the movement? Few schools that were established in this era remain in existence (the Sudbury Valley School and the Albany Free School are two notable exceptions). First, there was immense counter pressure applied to free schools at the local and national level. Education policies by the Nixon administration aggressively shifted education policy toward tighter government control (Scott, 1999). Local groups rallied against the founding of free schools in their communities, arguing that these schools were immoral, communist, and un-American.[19] Also, severed from state resources, these schools struggled to be financially solvent. The experimental nature of these schools, also, create a sort of instability. Whatever the reason(s), Miller (2002) observed that a "high proportion of the radical schools closed after only a year or two of operation" (p. 124).

External forces aside, there was also a lack of philosophical cohesiveness holding the movement together. For example, A.S. Neill's school Summerhill (which inspired many of the free schoolers) embraced the romantic, idyllic nature of childhood. Jonathan Kozol though, would assert that Summerhill "was one of the most racist schools in England" (as quoted in Miller, 2002, p. 71). Kozol (1972) thought that too many of the free schools pandered to the comforts and whims of white middle-class elites who were playing at this notion of education, while instead, free schools should be "in the midst of true and human confrontation with the real world of exploitation and oppression" (p. 52). Would free schools just continue to reproduce an inequitable society, but under the auspices of private rather than public education? Or would they

[19] This is a familiar tactic from the right, but in the case of free schools it is even more illogical. Schools built on the notion of freedom and democracy are deemed un-American, while schools built on compulsion and conformity are pictured as the only way for schools to function.

truly embody their revolutionary character by authentically existing for and alongside the oppressed? This schism proved to be an existential split for the movement, which was further fueled by the messiness of democracy itself. Whole communities trying to make decisions on pedagogy, ideology, and curriculum democratically is lengthy, chaotic, and intentionally not efficient. This lack of efficiency led many free schools to shift from full democracies to some sort of governance board for decision making, further splintering those truly seeking democratic, holistic schools and those merely seeking alternative education options. As a result of the philosophical divides and external pressures, Miller (2002) chronicled that in the early 1970s the free school movement splintered into at least three distinct groups: "a much reduced, less visible, but still active group of 'organic' community-based schools; a professional movement for public alternative schools; and a grassroots movement for homeschooling" (p. 130). Each of these groups will re-appear as the history of SDL continues to unfold.

Highlander Folk School, Citizenship Schools, and Education as Activism

There was another school movement that fomented around the same time as free schools. There were similarities between this movement and free schools: a focus on democratic engagement, a critical stance against American consumerism and commercialism, and a vision of education quite different than that of most other traditional schools (public and private alike). These schools became known as Citizenship Schools, adult learning centers that focused primarily on literacy education so that Black Americans could pass the racist literacy tests imposed via Southern Jim Crowe laws seeking to disenfranchise the Black vote (Levine, 2004).

The Citizenship School movement has its origin at the Highlander Folk School in eastern Tennessee. Highlander was founded by Myles Horton, an Appalachian native keenly aware of the plight and poverty of the rural south's working class. As a literature major at Cumberland

College in Lebanon, Tennessee, Horton began to organize Bible studies with locals. These slowly transitioned into community meetings to discuss a wide range of social issues, which compelled Horton to seek out further education in community organizing, democratic education, and social justice (Thayer-Bacon, 2004). In 1929, Horton traveled to Union Theological Seminary in New York City to "see how to get social justice and love together," (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990, p. 32). He studied under Reinhold Niebuhr, who introduced him to John Dewey and other scholars in progressive education. From New York, Horton traveled to the University of Chicago to study sociology. In Chicago, Horton was introduced to a Danish minster who informed him of the Danish Folk School movement. Horton traveled to Denmark in 1931 to see the schools for himself (Thayer-Bacon, 2004). After this era of research and exploration, Horton returned home to eastern Tennessee to establish a school that would put into practice Dewey's notion of democracy and education that was modeled in design on Danish folk schools. Horton "took his Christian idealism and sought a model by which people could educate themselves," (Surratt, 1990, p. 399).

The Highlander Folk School was founded in 1932 in Monteagle, Tennessee. Horton's philosophy of education was deeply tied to an idea of service. He wrote: "You're supposed to do something worthwhile with your life, and education is meant to help you do something for others," (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990, pp. 2-3). The founding belief of Highlander Folk School was in "the power of education to change society" (Glen, 1996, p. 2). For the ensuing decades, Highlander served as a center for education, literacy, and democratic engagement with the poor of eastern Tennessee. This work was done mostly through creating avenues for the community to work together to solve pressing problems, focusing primarily on labor conditions. In the 1950s, Highlander concluded that "racism presented the greatest obstacle to the kind of economic and

political order" the school envisioned (Glen, 1996, p. 4). Horton and the staff of Highlander made combating racism and enabling the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement a key part of the school's work.

In 1954, Esau Jenkins, a community organizer from John's Island, South Carolina and Septima Clark, Education Director at Highlander Folk School and a native of Charleston, South Carolina, attended a workshop alongside Myles Horton. The conversation turned to racist anti-voting measures in South Carolina, particularly in the difficulties in literacy education within the Gullah community of John's Island. The educational problem on the island was so acute that Jenkins had purchased a school bus and himself drove children and adults to Charleston for school and work (Clark, 1990, p. 46). The brainstorming session at Highlander then pivoted toward solutions and Jenkins proposed that Highlander assist in establishing an adult learning center on John's Island to train the community in the literacy skills needed to pass the literacy tests (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990, p. 99). Horton, Jenkins, and Clark began discussing how the center would be designed and implemented. Horton had learned through his experience at Highlander that adults appreciated a dignified learning environment and should not be taught to read using the same approach as teaching children (many adult literacy programs at the time were night classes that met in elementary schools and reused much of the same curriculum) (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990, pp. 100-101).

Highlander provided the money to purchase an old school building on the island and repurpose it as an adult learning center. The school housed a grocery store for the community and large meeting rooms for night classes to be held. The school used the proceeds from selling groceries to pay back Highlander for the cost of the building (Clark, 1990, pp. 47-48). The Citizenship School was established but needed an instructor. During a trip to Highlander,

Bernice Robinson, a native of Charleston, South Carolina and active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), told Horton "that if she could ever do anything for Highlander to let her know" (Horton, Kohl, &, Kohl, 1990, p. 102). Horton asked Robinson to lead the literacy instruction program on John's Island and the first Citizenship School was officially up and running.

So, in January of 1957, Bernice Robinson began class with 14 students with whom she developed the curriculum "day by day" (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990, p. 103). Robinson said that she had "never in my life seen such anxious people" that were so desirous to learn something as fundamental as how to read (Glen, 1996, p. 195). Robinson was not a trained educator but embodied the ability to truly listen to people. Her students loved her as she "gave priority to their immediate interests so they could experience the usefulness and joy of learning" (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990, p. 103). Without realizing it, Robinson was embodying the education philosophies of many of the theorists detailed in this chapter, from Aristotle to Dewey.

Robinson's class quickly doubled in size and over 80% of the students successfully registered to vote (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990). Between 1956 and 1960, there was a 300% increase in the number of registered Black voters on John's Island (Olendorf, 1990, p. 174). The success of the Citizenship School led to others being established by Highlander Folk School all over the rural south. The Citizenship School program became so popular that Highlander Folk School transferred management of the program to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the early 1960s. The SCLC, alongside of the NAACP and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) helped train thousands of teachers to serve in these Citizenship Schools (Clark, 1990, p. 70). The work of Horton, Jenkins, Clark, Robinson, and countless others directly led to thousands of Black Americans developing deep literacy skills and becoming

registered voters many years prior to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This is an excellent example of an educational approach that holds as its aim both the flourishing of the individual and the betterment of society.

Ivan Illich and Deschooling

In 1971, Ivan Illich published his critique of institutionalized education, *Deschooling Society.* His argument will be briefly presented here, as it connects to the development of contemporary SDL pedagogies. He began on enumerating his beliefs on what students are currently being "schooled" toward:

> The pupil is thereby "schooled" to confuse teaching with learning, grade achievement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is "schooled" to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work. (p. 1)

So, from the beginning, Illich rooted his argument in societal outcomes. Schools are structured to achieve certain ends. His argument is not that schools are failing, but rather that they are succeeding in how they were designed to function. For Illich, it was a matter of the sort of people and society that we want our schools to produce.

Illich defined "school" as "the age specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum" (p. 25-26). What then does it mean to deschool? Well, one implication is doing away with the present system of compulsory learning: "To deschool means to abolish the power of one person to oblige another person to attend a meeting," (p. 94). Illich goes on to present his argument against the prevailing notions of education.

The first part of Illich's definition of school is that it is "age specific." Children are sorted into grades arbitrarily based on age. He wrote that this built upon three premises: "Children belong in school. Children learn in school. Children can be taught only in school. I think these unexamined premises deserve serious questioning" (p. 26). His main line of questioning is around the concept of *childhood* as a social construct that only developed recently, primarily in Western cultures. He argued that *childhood* is a fictitious ideal that was created in order to subdue the population: "only by segregating human beings in the category of childhood could we ever get them to submit to the authority of a schoolteacher" (p. 28). Learning is not confined to certain years of a person's life. Instead, argued Illich, education should be available for anyone that seeks it (but forced upon no one).

Illich's next argument is the teacher-centrism of schooling. He pointed to the false equivalency between teaching and learning: "Teaching, it is true, may contribute to certain kinds of learning under certain circumstances. But most people acquire most of their knowledge outside of school," (p. 12). For Illich, schools are not really places of learning; they are primarily places of teaching. Teaching here is not seen as a bad thing. In fact, in the right circumstances, teaching could be very useful (like a master electrician teaching the trade to an apprentice). Illich's point is that the schooling he saw practiced in the United States (and around the globe) was focused primarily on what the teacher was doing, with the underlying assumption that learning was happening as well. The most important things, however, are learned, not taught: "We learn to speak, to think, to love, to feel, to play, to curse, to politick, and to work without interference from a teacher" (pp. 28-29). Part of Illich's argument circles back to the obligatory nature of schooling: "School, by its very nature, tends to make a total claim on the time and energy of its participants. This, in turn, makes the teacher into custodian, preacher, and therapist"

(p. 30). Students are forced to attend school, which gives the teacher *de facto* authority in the classroom. "Under the authoritative eye of the teacher," Illich argued, "several orders of value collapse into one. The distinctions between legality, morality, and personal worth are blurred and eventually eliminated" (p. 32). The job of teachers becomes the subjugation of the pupil. To Illich, deschooling is needed to emancipate the young from this abuse of authority.

To review, Illich noted three components in his definition of "school": leveling by age, a teacher-governed process, and an obligatory curriculum. After critiquing age groups and teacher-centrism, Illich turned his attention toward curriculum. He wrote:

> School sells curriculum — a bundle of goods made according to the same process and having the same structure as other merchandise. Curriculum production for most schools begins with allegedly scientific research, on whose basis educational engineers predict future demand and tools for the assembly line, within the limits set by budgets and taboos. The distributor-teacher delivers the finished product to the consumer-pupil…[who] are taught to make their desires conform to market values. Thus they are made to feel guilty if they do not behave according to the predictions of consumer research by getting the grades and certificates that will place them in the job category they have been led to expect. (p. 41)

That is the crux of Illich's argument: young people are mandated to attend schools, where authority has been centralized into the hands of the adults, and then they are forced to "consume" pre-packaged curriculum. Also at play is what Illich referred to as the *hidden curriculum*, the things that students learn in school but are not necessarily explicitly taught. Students are inculcated with what it means to be a consumer, what it means to be successful, what it means to be an American, what things count as *values*. Young people are "schooled" into these *myths* as

Illich called them. The answer, then, for Illich was not *reforming* education or undertaking a progressive approach to school. For Illich, the only solution was unschooling, throwing away completely the current approach to school.

Illich argued that education should have three purposes. First, "it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives" (p. 75). Education is not merely childcare, a place human beings are forced to attend for a portion of their lives until they age out. For Illich, education was about access to resources that anyone was free to (not compelled to) access. Second, education should "empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them" (p. 75). Illich believed that teachers-as-professionals were part of the systemic problem of schooling. Schooling, the lumbering machine that it is, requires teachers to operate it. Teachers gain job security regardless of the quality of their work because the machine necessitates their existence. Illich's solution would be to disband teaching as a profession, and instead create networks (called "learning webs") where people could learn from each other. The third purpose of education is to "furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known" (p. 75). Education should be about problem solving, and Illich envisioned an approach that contrasted with forcing students to encounter canned curriculum and instead offered the public (young and old alike) to participate in identifying and solving real societal problems together.

To Illich, real education does not start with the question "What should someone learn?" but with "What kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?" (p. 77-78). Everything starts with the learner, the person who has the impetus to initiate the learning process. Illich argued that instead of the current approach of *schooling*, education

should really be comprised of four overlapping "networks": reference services to resources, skill exchanges, peer-matching, and reference services to "educators-at-large" (p 78-79).

The first network has to do with the *tools* of learning: "If the goals of learning were no longer dominated by schools and schoolteachers, the market for learners would be much more various and the definition of 'educational artifacts' would be less restrictive" (p. 84). What does a learner need in order to accomplish a learning goal? Do they need access to a laboratory, a library, a tool shop, something else? What would it look like to open up educational resources for the public? Illich argued that communities would set their own maximum budgets for such resources and could implement gateways to costly or scarce items by requiring training/certification to use them. The people hired to oversee these spaces would be more like museum curators than teachers, helping direct learners to the resources they need. So, the first network — the reference service for educational objects — is all about connecting the learner with the resources they need for learning.

The second network — skill exchanges — connects a learner with a master. A guitar player, a brick mason, and an electrician all have mastered skills and can demonstrate those skills to others. It is not enough just to provide resources to learners; there are times when it will be necessary to connect them to a master who can demonstrate the *how to* of some task. Illich pointed to how technology was already changing this dynamic in 1971 (he wrote about how videotape allowed skill demonstrations to be recorded). Skill demonstrations no longer need to be conducted live, in-person, but can be stored and shared on a YouTube channel, podcast, Master Class, or something else. Still, there are times when someone aspiring to learn something needs to be taught by an expert in a one-on-one scenario. Illich envisioned creating a sort of

exchange, a type of societal institution that would award a person a "credit" when they teach a skill to someone else that they can spend to "hire" someone to teach them something else.

The third network in Illich's form of education is peer-matching. He likens this to a chess club or reading circle — a group of peers journeying to learn, master, or discuss the same thing. There is a communal aspect to learning. In a vibrant educational system, there would exist an easy way (Illich envisioned a computer database) to find other people who share one's interests. Today, social media networks could easily provide that type of service. The goal would be to invest in an infrastructure that allowed learners to find each other, structure their own classes and meetings, and learn together.

Once a learner has been connected with the resources they need, a master to learn from, and fellow travelers on the journey, they may still need yet more. Illich envisions a fourth network: the professional educator. At first, this may seem like a contradiction as he has just argued against professional teachers. "As the schoolmaster vanishes," he argued, "conditions will arise which should bring forth the vocation of the independent educator" (p. 97). Illich does not have in mind here a teacher. The educator does not lecture nor demonstrate mastery. Rather, they have three functions: first is the creation and maintenance of the first three networks outlined above, second is the ability to guide learners (young and old alike) to use the networks, and third is to be a type of sage, what Illich referred to as an "educational initiator or leader" (p. 99). These independent educators are envisioned as guides: learners come to them with a problem or inquiry, and they help provide the learner with the resources to move forward.

John Holt and the Freedom to Learn

John Holt was an influential voice in the homeschool movement (and later in the unschool movement) in the 1970s and 1980s. Born in the 1920s, Holt received an education from

elite private schools and an Ivy League university that he refused to name (Miller, 2002, p. 79). He served in the Navy during World War II but became an ardent pacificist after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After the war, he served as an organizer for the World Federalists, an organization seeking to foster and support global democratic institutions to work toward peace, justice, and equality. He would then transition to education, teaching in private elementary schools in Colorado and Massachusetts from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s. His years as an elementary school teacher disillusioned him to the complete system of education. He kept a diary of his teaching experience, publishing it under the tile *How Children Fail* in 1964. He wrote this in his introduction:

> Most children fail in school…They complete their schooling only because we have agreed to push them up through the grades and out of the school, whether they know anything or not…But there is a more important sense in which almost all children fail: Except for a handful, who may or may not be good students, they fail to develop more than a tiny part of the tremendous capacity for learning, understanding, and creating with which they were born and of which they made full use during the first two or three years of their lives. Why do they fail? They fail because they are bored, afraid, and confused. (p. 5)

The book is structured as journal entries, starting on February 12, 1958, and ending on June 15, 1961. Over those three years, Holt documented what he saw as a process of school slowly crushing the curiosity out of children. His main argument (like Illich and the Free School Movement that served as his contemporaries) is against coercion. He wrote that "the idea of painless, nonthreatening coercion is an illusion. Fear is the inseparable companion of coercion, and its inescapable consequence" (p. 294). His solution (at this point in his life; he would later

argue against schooling) was to have classrooms where "each child in his own way can satisfy his curiosity, develop his abilities and talents, pursue his interests, and from the adults and older children around him get a glimpse of the great variety and richness of life" (p. 295). In short, Holt's solution was self-directed learning.

Miller (2002) noted that Holt was "not a scholar or theorist, but a moralist and reformer" (p. 82). He was not in conversation with Aristotle and Rousseau and claimed in one interview that he had not ready any of John Dewey's work (p. 82). Instead, Holt's arguments against coercive education were fomented by his own experience in the classroom. Since Holt's arguments are being shaped by his experiences, they remain in flux over the course of his career. Sure, all writers and theorists adapt and grow over time. Their ideas change and evolve, and maybe they even disagree with the arguments that once put forward. Holt, though, being untethered from a particular thought tradition, moved through seasons pretty quickly.

In *How Children Fail* (1964), Holt highlighted the brokenness he saw in the education system from the perspective of a teacher. His follow-up *How Children Learn* (1967) was a sort of corrective: his arguments for improving education. He echoes many of the arguments from Aristotle and Rousseau. Children are naturally curious. They want to find out how things work, they want to explore, experiment, and solve problems. They want to make things. They want to gain control over themselves and make meaning of their world. They *want to learn*. He wrote: "School is not the sort of place that gives much time, or opportunity, or reward for this kind of thinking and learning. Can we make it so? I think we can, and must" (p. 277). Holt obviously at this stage sees education reform as something real and attainable. He would become disillusioned in that quest.

In 1976, Holt published *Instead of Education*, a book that shunned schooling altogether. He had this to say about those impassioned educators seeking to reform schools from the inside:

> People who call themselves 'radical teachers' are fooling themselves. As part of their job, they will take attendance every day, report late and absent students, enforce the school rules, and give tests and grades — or they will be fired. But in doing these things they help the schools carry out their fundamental and status-quo-preserving tasks. Doing the school's work, they teach the school's message, and all their talk, however Radical or Subversive, will not outweigh or undo that teaching. (p. 210)

Holt was an influential voice in the free school movement, as outlined earlier in the chapter. As the momentum of that particular movement waned and failed to coalesce into the sort of revolution many progressive educators had hoped to see, Holt moved further and further from his belief that school (he often referred to it as S-chool, to denote that it was a technocratic institution) could be the sort of place where free learning happened. He wrote that even a school like Summerhill, which he deeply admired, was "still a S-chool, because the students who were there could only choose to go to Summerhill or *some other S-chool* (almost certainly worse)" (1976, p. 23, italics in original).

Holt sees any form of compulsory education as harmful to children, no matter how interesting the pedagogy or caring the educators. There is no reforming or saving education through structures or institutions. At this stage in Holt's thinking, the only option was to leave schools behind. Not just leave, but escape. Holt called for a "Children's Underground Railroad" to assist the young in fleeing compulsory education (1976, p. 222). This suggestion may seem like hyperbole, but Holt was not exaggerating. He saw compulsory education as tantamount to child abuse and the only moral response was to resist that system, even if that meant creating

illegal networks to smuggle children out of schools and into emancipation. What about families that did not have the resources for a parent to stay home? They should send their children to family, friends, or other "sympathetic adults" who could assist (p. 225).

Holt became an influential leader of the homeschool movement in the 1970s. It is interesting to note that homeschooling became increasingly popular among conservative Christians, especially into the 1980s and 1990s, but it was really the counterculture movement of the left that spurred the free school movement in the 1960s that brought homeschooling discourse to relevancy. Holt ultimately shunned homeschooling as it was conceptualized as just another way to make children learn things. In essence, much of the homeschooling movement mimicked the worst parts of compulsory education, but just changed the setting from school to home. He joined Ivan Illich in calling for de-schooling, an approach to education that removed the concept of *school* as a compulsory force. In some ways, Holt brings the SDL discourse full circle, recycling Aristotle and Rousseau by placing the concept of learning fully and completely in the hands of the learner.

Malcolm Knowles and the Learning Economy

In the 1960s and 1970s, a few North American researchers in the field of adult education became the first to popularize the phrase *self-directed learning* (Houle 1961; Knowles 1970, 1975; Rogers 1969; Tough 1971). Malcolm Knowles (1975) perhaps offered the clearest definition of what is meant by self-directed learning:

> In its broadest meaning, "self-directed learning" describes 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. (p. 18)

For Knowles, it was incumbent on the individual to take responsibility for the process of their learning — from assessing their own learning needs to evaluating their own work. Education thus conceptualized is the opposite of *teacher-directed* learning, in which the learner is "essentially a dependent personality and...the teacher has the responsibility of deciding what and how the learner should be taught," (p. 20).

Knowles (1975) further highlighted this difference between teacher-directed and self-directed learning, stating that "it is a tragic fact that most of us only know how to be taught; we haven't learned how to learn," (p. 14). For Knowles, self-directed learning went beyond a new or innovative model of education. There were four main reasons for his *why* of SDL, each increasing in urgency.

The first was that people who know how to learn enjoy learning more. He argued that "they enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. They also tend to retain and make use of what they learn better and longer," (p. 14). Morris (2019), in a review of empirical studies of self-directed learning, claimed that self-directed learners tend to "enjoy learning; exhibit initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; accept learning responsibility; view problems as challenges; and are capable of self-discipline," (p. 642). So, Knowles's first point is that self-directed learners tend to be happier in their educational journeys. This focus on *happiness* echoes Rousseau and A. S. Neill, who saw individual flourishing as the reason for education.

The second reason why Knowles thought it was such a tragedy that most people are only *taught to be taught* is because he believed that self-direction was more "in tune" with what he

referred to as our "natural processes of psychological development" (p. 14). As babies, he believed, we need someone to take care of all of our needs and make our decisions for us. As our bodies and minds grow, we do more tasks for ourselves. "An essential aspect of maturing," he argued, "is developing the ability to take increased responsibility for our lives — to become increasingly self-directed," (p. 15). We were made to be self-directed learners, Knowles argued. We, as a species, have only recently equated education as teacher-drive, and this dependence has led to a sort of arrested development. This focus on *natural processes* is also rooted in the philosophy of Rousseau, and Knowles echoed Montessori's call for *independence* in arguing that as we mature we take increased responsibility for our lives.

A third reason (and one highlighted by educational shifts brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic) is that "new developments in education...put a heavy responsibility on the learners to take a good deal of initiative in their own learning," (p. 15). Knowles saw a world in 1975 that was just on the precipice of the computer age. The political winds were blowing the sails of higher education into neoliberal waters. Curriculum and instruction were undergoing great change due to these political, economic, and technological upheavals. It was incumbent on the student, then, to navigate the changing landscape of education and Knowles believed that "students entering these programs without learning the skills of self-directed inquiry will experience anxiety, frustration, and often failure" (p. 15).

Not only was education changing, but Knowles believed it to be a "simple truth...that we are entering a strange new world in which rapid change will be the only stable characteristic" (p. 15). In this world of rapid change, transmitting knowledge with an ever-shrinking half-life becomes pointless, and if education is not about the transmission of facts, then what is it? For Knowles, "the main purpose of education now must be to develop the skills of inquiry," (p. 15).

And if developing skills of inquiry was now the purpose of education, then we must rethink the structure of schools. Knowles argued that "we must come to think of learning as being the same as living. We must learn from everything we do; we must exploit every experience as a 'learning experience,'" (p. 16). In this conceptualization of learning, schools lose their hold on defining *knowledge* and measuring *learning*. Also, schooling can no longer be thought of as time-bound (something finished in a set number of years and culminating in a degree). Instead, Knowles argued, "education — or, even better, learning — must now be defined as a lifelong process," (p. 16). Many of today's most popular jobs did not exist a decade ago. Knowles made these arguments 45 years ago, seeing the rapidly changing world of work on the horizon. An education is not something you *get*, but rather something you *do* — experiences you have, skills you sharpen, over and over again.

For Knowles, becoming a self-directed learner was not just a *better* or more *innovative* way to do education. He saw it as an existential need:

> To sum up: the "why" of self-directed learning is survival — your own survival as an individual, and also the survival of the human race. Clearly, we are not talking here about something that would be nice or desirable; neither are we talking about some new educational fad. We are talking about a basic human competence — the ability to learn on one's own — that has suddenly become a prerequisite for living in this new world. (p. 16-17)

So, to Knowles, the "tragic fact" that most of us only know how to be taught instead of to learn on our own is a threat to our existence. This existential urgency — that we must learn to learn or face the consequences — is different from the romanticism of Rousseau that inspired the schools at Summerhill and Sudbury Valley.

This move in the philosophy — from self-directed learning as a means of raising curious children that can solve problems and participate in a democratic society to seeing it as an existential need brought about by technology and globalization — is important to recent work in the field. Inspired by Knowles, Lucy Guglielmino (1978) developed a quantitative instrument known as the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS). The SDLRS has been used in numerous capacities (higher education, organizational development, human resources) on an international scale to gauge a learner's ability to direct their own learning (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). This instrumentation has moved the focus from seeing children as innately curious beings who desire to know the world around them to seeing self-directedness as a *quality* that can be measured in an adult through quantitative instruments.

The ability to attach metrics to self-directedness at once led to the increase in SDL research, due primarily to the influence that cognitive psychology and positivistic quantitative studies have in the field of education research. Though this body of research led to the creation of SDL as a respected sub-field of education research, it also has moved SDL pedagogies away from their philosophical roots and toward an overly analytical view of education that bears much in common with traditional education approaches. This pivot in the history of SDL will be explored in the next section.

The International Society of Self-Directed Learning: Quantifying and Qualifying Self-Directedness

In 1986, Huey Long established the first-ever International Symposium on Self-Directed Learning at the University of Georgia (Guglielmino, Long, and Hiemstra, 2004). The symposium would convene ever year for the next 35 years (the 35th symposium was scheduled for February, 2021; they instead opted for a *virtual summit*, in hopes that the 35th anniversary symposium

could be celebrated in person in 2022). The symposium became a gathering spot for SDL researchers and theorists. From the symposium, the International Society of Self-Directed Learning (ISSDL) was born. The ISSDL hosts the annual symposium as well as publishes *The International Journal of Self-Directed Learning*. These two avenues provide researchers from around the world chances to share and collaborate on SDL research.

Prior to the development of the symposium and the ISSDL, Guglielmino (1977), a student of Long's, developed the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) after a three-round Delphi study in which 13 prominent SDL researchers and writers came to consensus on the characteristics of what made a self-directed learner. The SDLRS became a tool to quantify and measure a person's propensity towards self-direction. Up until this point, arguments for SDL had been theoretical and philosophical (via Neill, Greenberg, Illich, Holt, Knowles, and others). Now, researchers had an instrument to use and a way to quantify self-directedness. Brockett (1985) noted, "The SDLRS has helped move self-directed learning research beyond description toward a greater understanding of the relationship between self-directedness and certain personological variables" (p. 56).

This approach to research is a clear break with the philosophical traditions of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Montessori, Illich, Holt and others who have argued for a learner-centric view of education. So far in this chapter, *learning* has been presented as a rather natural phenomenon. Learning comes through nature (Rousseau), through sensory exploration (Pestalozzi), though play (Froebel), through transactional experiences (Dewey), through free inquiry (Holt). Now, with quantitate instrumentation, learning is broken down into sub-processes and individuals can be gauged on how well they possess these self-directed characteristics.

This is not to discredit the work of Guglielmino or the impact that the ISSDL has had on education. In fact, there are a number of schools districts world-wide who have moved toward more SDL models because of the work of this research.[20] However, it should be pointed out that this era in the history of SDL moved many in the field of progressive and alternative education more toward traditional ways of thinking about schooling. SDL became more and more about its characteristics (what makes a self-directed learner and how can schools "make" a person more self-directed?) and its benefits to the individual (a self-directed learner is happier, more productive, more competitive in the job market, etc.). What is often missing from the conversation when tools like the SDLRS and methods like multivariate analysis are in play is the *why*? For most of this chapter, education philosophers have been seeking to drill down to the heart of education — what is education, why do we educate, and how do we educate.

The sort of reductionism inherent in surveys, Likert scales, and other such metrics is not interested in the messiness of philosophizing. So, interestingly enough, the ISSDL has not researched deeply the historical or philosophical basis for SDL (this was addressed in the introduction to this chapter). Instead, the history of SDL often begins with the work of adult education theorists like Houle, Knowles, Rogers, and Tough in the 1970s. The purpose of this dissertation is to address this lack of historicity and theorizing. Some of the more contemporary research into SDL will be covered in Chapter Three, as it builds the argument of this dissertation that SDL is not just theoretical or historical, but practical in today's learning environments.

Acton Academies: Micro-Schools and Franchising SDL

In 2010, Acton Academy was founded in Austin, Texas. Acton Academy was far from the first school focused on SDL pedagogies (as earlier exemplars in this chapter attest). What

[20] SDL is now infused in school design in all public schools in Taiwan (see Chen, Chen, Tsai, Li, & Guglielmino, 2020) and in a public university in South Africa (see Reitsma, Guglielmino, & Mentz, 2012).

was unique about Acton, though, was that though it was a small school, started in a house, it was primed to scale. Over a decade later, there are over 200 Acton Academies worldwide. Researcher Heather Staker (2018) wrote that Acton "empowers children with the habits, mentors, online lessons, and tracking system that they need to be able to manage their own learning. That delegation of control helps the children develop agency — the ability to make choices" (p. xv).

The combination of e-learning platforms, access to resources for the network, and a lean business model made Acton franchises appealing to people looking to start an alternative school. For purposes of disclosure, I co-founded an Acton Academy in 2018. As such, I have years of first-hand knowledge with the network, have attended annual conferences with other Acton leaders, and have visited other schools in the network. In this section, I will briefly highlight the Acton approach and link it to the SDL theories and history that have been presented so far in this chapter.

The heart of Acton Academy is that school should be learner-driven. While many proponents of progressive education are pushing for a lower student to teacher ratio, Acton is intentionally moving in the other direction, seeking to have as few adults as possible at each school. There are two main reasons for this, one practical and one driven by the education philosophy of the school. The practical reason is that fewer adults mean a smaller budget, which in turn means a lower tuition. This lean financial model has helped the network scale quickly to hundreds of schools in under a decade. The philosophical reason lies in the history of SDL as presented in this chapter. Aristotle held that people are natural curious, an argument that has resurfaced through the centuries in the work of writers like Rousseau, Dewey, and Holt. Adult presence in schools often reifies the external authority of compulsory education. So, what happens if you shrink the adult presence in these environments?

The assumption of traditional education (remember, this type of schooling is government by compliance and accountability) is that children, when left to themselves, will dissolve into chaos. Acton Academy questions this assumption by intentionally designing learning environments that minimize the role of the adult. At the beginning of the school year, the guide (Acton's term for educator) will assist learners in creating their own rules and norms for the space and designing a governance structure to impose consequences on breaking the agreements. The guide's own authority in the classroom is limited by a contract they sign with the learners, usually stating that they are there to ensure safety and support learners on their own journeys. Then, the guide steps back and lets the learners govern their space.

Guides are expected to stay in Socratic mode, meaning they refrain from lectures or giving commands and instead engage learners in discussions and inquiries by asking questions. Acton is an intentionally self-directed learning environment, so learners set their own goals for what work they aim to accomplish on a given day. A learner progresses through Acton by completing a Badge Plan, which is a customized a set of skills, subjects, and competencies agreed upon by the learner, their family, and the guide. Learners earn badges by showcasing mastery of a skill, subject, or competency. The badge process looks different at each Acton, but badges are usually peer-approved, with the guide assisting learners to think through how to differentiate quality work from work that needs substantial revision and how to give robust feedback.

Acton is sort of like an inverse of the free school movement of the 1960s. Free schools were united around a political aim — democratic schools that existed in opposition to public schools and institutions — but had little cohesiveness around the *how* of school. Acton is a toolbox of *hows* — Socratic guiding, project-based learning, learner created contracts, e-learning

platforms, a system of badging — but an intentionally apolitical stance. So, some Actons exhibit the free school spirit of earlier alternative education models, some are grounded in humanistic inquiry, some are religious schools, some are homeschool cooperatives. Part of Acton's success has been the ability to appeal to a wide-range of political and ideological groups. What is worthy of more attention (and will be addressed in Chapter Three) is the role that growing, private, micro-school networks play in the discourse around school choice and privatization. For now, Acton Academy, as perhaps the most visible representation of SDL pedagogy, represents the end of this chapter's journey through education history. This chapter will conclude with a critique of the SDL discourse that has gained momentum in recent decades (from Malcolm Knowles to Acton Academy). One of the major critics in recent years has been education philosopher Gert Biesta.

Gert Biesta and the Threat of *Learnification*

The push toward SDL has not been free of critique. While Malcolm Knowles raised the alarm for the need for individuals to take the reins of their own learning in order to ensure their own survival, Gert Biesta (2016) has been raising a counter-alarm. To him, the threat is not that we will fail to take up the mantle of *learner*, but that we will in fact succeed:

> Claims like these — which almost sound like threats: You will not be able to meet life challenges unless you are a lifelong learner! Society will not be sustainable unless it is a learning society! — have become all too familiar in recent times, so that it may well be argued that we live in a "learning age." (p. 61)

Biesta critiqued the removal of *teaching* from education and the rise of *learning*. "The main 'target' for my critique," he argued, "is the suggestion that learning is something natural, something we cannot *not* do," (p. 59).

The first step in his critique was to question the "discourse of 'learning'" or what he called the "'learnification' of the discourse of education" (p. 62). In Biesta's estimation, there has been a sharp rise in the verbiage *learn, learner,* and *learning* among education circles. Students are *learners*, schools are *places of learning*, even education is dubbed the field of *teaching and learning*. To Biesta, this discourse of *learnification* is political. The word *learn* is problematic because, though the word itself is neutral (you can learn how to solve an algebra equation or how to build a bomb), it presents itself as a positive, in the sense that *all learning is good*. This is an issue, he argued, "as the notion of education...is never just that students learn, but that they learn *something* and that they learn this for particular *reasons*," (p. 63). The concept of *learning* is void of purpose and content, and therefore to Biesta, it is a threat to real education, which is intentional and purposeful.

Another critique of the discourse of *learnification* is its focus on the individual. Learning is something that I can only do for myself. You cannot learn for me. The rise of *learning*, then, has "shifted attention away from the importance of *relationships* in educational processes and practices," (p. 63). For the learner, what is the role of the teacher and peers? Where does responsibility begin and end in a classroom? For Biesta, the individualization of learning comes at a great cost. This part of the debate, individual versus social purposes in education, in some ways echoes the different viewpoints of Rousseau and Dewey discussed earlier.

There are more political considerations to the language of *learning*. Biesta (2016) believed that the discourse was driven by economic forces and that in *learnification* there was an "emphasis on the need for individuals to adapt and adjust to the demands of the global economy," (p. 66). This is a calculated move in Biesta's eyes, away from a purpose of education that had as its aim social and democratic betterment and towards one that was squarely market

driven. It is on the individual — the *learner* — to maintain their employability while society at large can wash its hands of responsibility.

To Biesta, perhaps the most incendiary piece of the discourse of *learning* was the claim that it is a natural process, "a tendency to see learning as an entirely natural phenomenon—on the same par as breathing and digestion," (p. 68). Again, Biesta found fault with this reasoning for many of the same reasons already listed, mainly that it positions *learning* as an always-positive experience and that the responsibility of this learning is entirely on the individual. The logic is this: a person naturally learns, and if a person does not learn, then something is wrong with them. They lack drive, responsibility, motivation, adaptability, resourcefulness — they are deficient in something, somehow. There is no need to question systems, structures, society, teachers, schools, and curriculum. If learning is like breathing, then who ultimately is responsible for it?

What was Biesta's solution to this so-called *learnification*? He encouraged people to resist the label of learner. Refuse to be a cog in the machine. Push back on claims that the individual is solely responsible for their education. "To refuse the learner identity," he argued, "is not to denounce the importance of learning, but to denaturalize and hence politicize learning so that choices, politics, and power become visible," (p. 70). This refusal "exposes and opposes the politics of learning at work" and is but one small way to resist the taken-for-grantedness assumed in the language of *learnification* (p. 70).

3 EXPLORING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The previous chapter surveyed over 2,300 years of education philosophy. Again, the goal of this study is not to present an exhaustive chronicle of education history, but rather to tease out the key figures, events, and concepts that continued the development in Western education philosophy of what contemporary researchers term *self-directed learning*. More time and attention could have been spent on each figure presented. However, brevity was necessitated as this journey through history served a very clear point: there have been multitudes of thinkers, writers, and educators who have espoused some form of what this study is referring to as SDL for millennia. SDL is not a new trend in education. It is ancient. It is varied. It has been put into practice numerous times in numerous places.

This chapter pivots from the historical survey of SDL to contemporary SDL research. The goal of this chapter is to de-mystify SDL pedagogies by providing detailed description of what an SDL environment could look and feel like by presenting contemporary exemplars. Some of the writings presented in Chapter Two can seem idyllic, out of reach, belonging to the realm of theory but ultimately impractical, or at least not practical in today's high-stakes, high-stress education environment. The intention here is to be descriptive, not prescriptive. To that end, the content of this chapter will highlight how different researchers and practitioners have put SDL pedagogies into practice and is not intended to be a checklist or litmus test for what a learner led environment must look and feel like.

The Claim

There are numerous cases of contemporary self-directed learning environments. Research around these environments shows that in order to instantiate an SDL space, one needs to rethink the role of the teacher, the role of the learner, the role of the environment, the role of peers, and

the role of learning experiences (traditionally referred to as *curriculum*). Though not presented as models for one to follow, or as a prescriptive "how-to" in designing for SDL, the research here shows that there are and have been a variety of educational spaces built upon some variation of SDL pedagogy.

The Constraints

There has been an explosion of SDL research in the past few decades (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, the Alliance for Self-Directed Education crystalized into a 501c3 in the past decade). 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 chapter cannot cover all that is emerging from this SDL research and school design. As such, this chapter will move thematically through the literature, covering topics such as the role of the educator and the role of the environment in the implementation of SDL spaces.

The Structure

First, this study will look into the different skills cultivated by SDL, as well as discuss whether or not learners must already possess certain pre-requisite skills. Then, the discussion will shift to the *place* of learning, analyzing the role of schools in SDL. A logical follow-up will be the role of educators. If a learner is directing their own education, what then becomes of teachers?

Following this discussion, the argument will then pivot to looking at the larger forces in the discourse of SDL. How can SDL address the growing equity gap of the current education

system? Is SDL a pedagogical model that can work for all learners, or is it a privileged approach for a small number of private schools? Also, how does the larger political conversations around concepts of *freedom*, *choice*, and *responsibility* influence SDL discourse? Additionally, neo-liberal market forces have touched all aspects of education. How do these forces show up in SDL spaces?

Ready to Learn: The Skills of SDL

What does a self-directed learner look like? Long and Agyekum (1983) argued that "there are some rather clearly identifiable behaviors and abilities associated with self-direction in learning. They include intelligence, independence, confidence, persistence, initiative, creativity, ability to critically evaluate one's self, patience, desire to learn and task orientation," (p. 78). They went on to identify self-directed learning as possessing "tolerance of ambiguity, ability to discover new approaches, prior success with independent learning, preference for working alone, knowledge of variety of resources, ability to plan, [and the] ability to carry out a plan," (p. 78).

Over the past decades, researchers have sought to identify and assess for such SDL skills. It should be noted here that this strand of SDL research derives from positivist traditions that seek through quasi-experimental research design to view learning as a science that can be parsed into distinct, defined variables (this was already mentioned toward the end of Chapter Two). That conflicts with the philosophical foundations of humanism, pragmatism, and constructivism as presented in Chapter One and I view such attempts at reductionism as problematic. However, this research tradition has provided valuable insights into the innerworkings of SDL and helps advance the basic argument of this dissertation that the skills of SDL are not fixed personality traits, but rather learnable. Also, this era of SDL research was influential in moving SDL from a niche education philosophy to a respected subunit of education research — due in large part to

the influence that quantitative, positivistic research has in the field of education research. Perhaps the most impactful development from this strand of research came from Guglielmino (1978), who developed the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) to provide quantitative measurement to these rather abstract ideas of motivation, initiative, and persistence. Her work led her to identify the following characteristics of self-directed learners:

> A highly self-directed learner, based on the survey results, is one who exhibits initiatives, independence, and persistence in learning; one who accepts responsibility for his or her own learning and views problems as challenges, not obstacles; one who is capable of self-discipline and has a high degree of curiosity; one who has a strong desire to learn or change and is self-confident; one who is able to use basic study skills, organize his or her time and set a pace for learning, and to develop a plan for completing work; one who enjoys learning and has a tendency to be goal oriented. (p 73)

Researchers have used the SDLRS to investigate a variety of correlates to SDL, arguing that by building the skills of SDL, a person also builds resilience (Robinson, 2003), emotional intelligence (Muller, 2007), cross-cultural adaptability (Chuprina & Durr, 2006), conscientiousness (Oliviera & Simoes, 2006), and overall life satisfaction (Edmonson et al., 2012).

Researchers have also investigated as to whether the characteristics of SDL as identified by Long and Guglielmino are fixed character traits or if they are learnable. Again, such inquiry leads through decades of research in cognitive psychology, which is not the grounding of this philosophical argument. The point, though, is important to address. Perhaps the strongest arguments for the development of SDL related skills and competencies come from Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura (1977, 1997). Of particular importance is Bandura's concept of

self-efficacy, where motivation for initiating a task is derived from an individual's belief and confidence in their own abilities to accomplish the task.

Bandura (1977) argued that there were four main sources of influence that affected an individual's sense of self-efficacy. The first is past experience, or what Bandura terms *mastery experiences*. Past failures and/or successes are, in Bandura's view, the most influential sources of whether an individual feels confident in their ability to accomplish a similar task in the future. The second source of influence is *vicarious experiences* — examples set by friends, peers, siblings, and others. People can build (or lose) confidence in themselves by witnessing the successes (or failures) of others. The third area of influence is *social persuasion.* The encouragement or discouragement that comes from parents, teachers, or peers impacts a person's sense of self-efficacy. The final influencing factor identified by Bandura was a person's *emotional state*. An individual's mood, as well as propensity for depression or anxiety, greatly influences their sense of self-efficacy.

Bandura's concept of self-efficacy led to his development of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which grew out of his earlier work in Social Learning Theory (SLT). With SCT, Bandura (1985) posited a "triadic reciprocal determinism" in regard to human behavior (p. 1). Human activity is influenced by the triadic interplay of environment, cognition, and behavior. What people believe about themselves and their abilities (cognition) is shaped by their social context, experiences, and relationships (environment). Cognition impacts their choices and actions (behavior), which in turn shape their beliefs about themselves and their abilities, which in turn influences their environment and social relationships.

For Bandura, it is possible to change one's sense of self-efficacy by intervening in the triadic interplay of environment, behavior, and cognition. If someone is lacking in self-

confidence toward a task, an environmental change (social pressures in the form of encouragement and/or vicarious experiences in the form of observing others succeed at the task) may influence behavior (one's choices and actions) which would then change one's view of self and ability (cognition). Bandura's SCT was further developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) into Social Career Cognitive Theory (SCCT) in an effort to understand why people have the interests that they do and make the career choices they make.

SCCT posited that there are five determinants to a person's interest, goals, and actions (see Figure 3.1). There are *person inputs*, these are the identity traits one is born into the world with that they neither choose nor control. (i.e. race, gender, ableness).[21] Then there are *background environmental influences*, the socio-cultural contexts of one's own situatedness (i.e. family contexts, economic status, culture). An individual has little to no control of their *person inputs* and *background environmental influences.* Then there are the *learning experiences* a person encounters, both in formal and informal learning settings. These learning experiences shape one's *self-efficacy* (what a person thinks they are capable of) and their *outcome expectations* (what will happen if they fail or succeed). The interplay between *learning experiences, self-efficacy,* and *outcome expectations* influences the interests one has, the goals they set, and the actions they take. According to Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), a change in a person's *learning experiences, self-efficacy,* and/or *outcome expectations* will then directly influence their interests, goals, and actions. They argue that it is possible to undergo new or

[21]This study acknowledges that these designators are social constructs. The argument here is not that categories like gender are fixed, but rather, SCCT posits that there are biological factors to our personhood that impact our identity.

different learning experiences, change one's sense of self-efficacy, and alter one's outcome expectations.

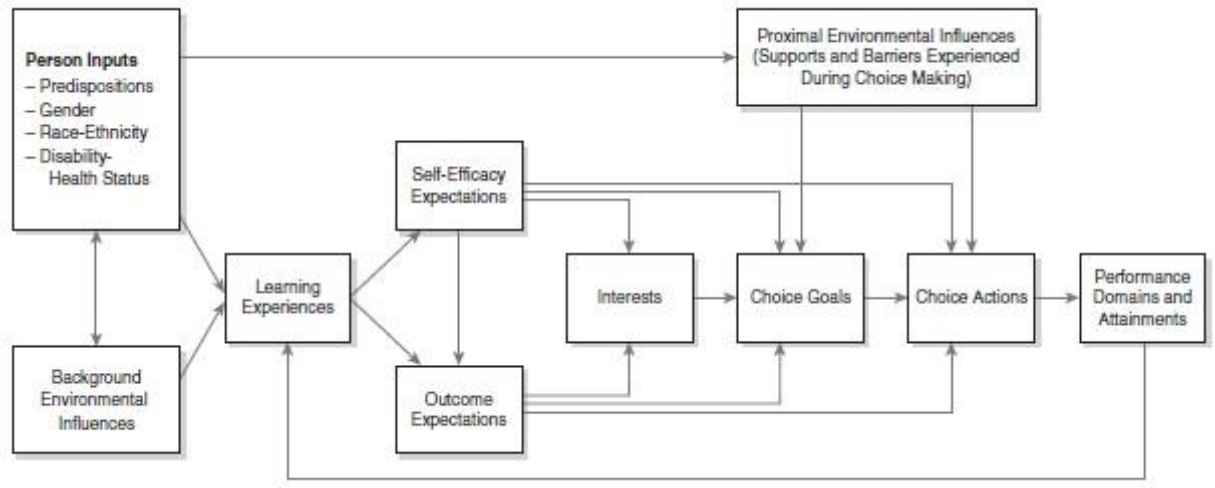

Figure #3.1: Social Career Cognitive Theory. Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994).

Bandura (1977, 1985, 1989, 1997) has argued that these factors, even the environmental influencers like familial interactions and social context, are not static determinants. Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) have argued that it is possible for a person to change the interests they have, the goals they set, and the actions they take by altering their learning experiences, their belief in their own capabilities, and their predictions of outcomes. Self-efficacy and a person's desire to learn, therefore, can be built and shaped over time. It is not a pre-requisite that a learner enters into an SDL space already possessing motivation toward self-directedness. These are skills that can be developed. Research in the fields of psychology and neuroscience has also shown that a person's motivation to learn is greatly impacted by whether or not they have had key needs met, like feelings of safety, continuity, competence, and meaning (Deci & Flaste, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hammond, 2014; Raab, 2017). In order for a learner, then, to find motivation and move toward action, care must be taken to cultivate an environment and levy resources to meet these needs and tackle chronic stressors like scarcity, identity threats, and shame (Brown, 2015; Csikszentmihalyi, 1979 2008; Mullainathan & Shafir, 2014; Raab, 2017; Sandi et al., 2001).

The pages of the *International Journal of Self-Directed Learning* are filled with quantitative research studies parsing SDL into subskills that can be tested and examined on an individual level. What is important for the purposes of the larger argument of this dissertation is that anyone can be a self-directed learner. In Chapter Two, the historical survey of SDL theory showcased Pestalozzi working out learner led pedagogies with orphans in Switzerland and Montessori putting her theory into practice in impoverished Roman tenement buildings. The point is that SDL is not just a niche educational option for upper class families. It is not true that children can enter into a SDL environment only if they possess certain character traits or skills. It is the argument of this dissertation that all humans can direct their own learning.

The mindsets and dispositions of the learner are only one part of what makes learning self-directed. Attention must also be given to the learning environment and the role of the educator. What type of space lends itself to cultivating a learner led education? What is the role of a teacher in such a space? Those questions have already been addressed peripherally in Chapter Two, as the history of SDL unfolded across schools, continents, theorists, and educators. Now, it is time to look at those questions more directly. The next two sections will explore the makings of an SDL environment and the role of the educator in those environments.

Experience and Environment: The Role of School in SDL

John Dewey (1916/1944) wrote over a century ago:

> Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so intrenched in practice? That education is not an affair of ‘telling’ and being told, but an active and constructive process is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory. (p. 38)

Little has changed since Dewey's assessment. In just about every school in the U.S., this is showcased as education: a teacher, sitting or standing in front of the class, "pouring in" information via lectures, worksheets, textbooks, or some other form of transmission to largely passive students (which can also be done, as the pandemic has shown, remotely). Teaching primarily by transmission is enacted in classrooms while teachers colleges and departments of education around the country speak of the value of experiential learning, using the works of Dewey and Vygotsky to make their case. Teacher-centric education has become so intrenched that it is often hard to imagine what an experiential learning environment would look like.

What are the things that comprise a learning environment? There are lots of considerations. The location and architecture of the building. The management of space. Interior decoration and design, the type and layout of the furniture — all of these are *environmental* factors. Why are traditional school environments designed the way they are? Foucault (1995), after a lengthy exploration of how society had embraced surveillance and control of citizens, offered this critical observation: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (p. 228). Schools, like prisons and factories, are institutions designed to control. How would an environment that fosters freedom differ in design?

The previous chapter highlighted a few exemplars of SDL learning spaces. Places like Summerhill started in a country house in Lyme Regis, England (the name of the house was Summerhill, a name that would follow the school as it moved to larger locations) (Neill, 1960). Likewise, Sudbury Valley School was launched out of a large house in Framingham, Massachusetts (Greenberg, 1987), and Acton Academy launched in a house in Austin, Texas (Sandefer, 2018). Both Sudbury and Acton launched networks of micro-schools, many of which

reside in homes or studio spaces. Dewey and Montessori also created their learning spaces to be *home*-like (Martin, 1992; Mayhew and Edwards, 1936). The focus in these types of spaces is intentionally un-institutional. Learners often have a choice of where to work and what kind of work to do.[22]

So, perhaps the first part of setting up an environment for learner led education is to intentionally design the space. Pay attention to the aesthetic factors, pay attention to the emotive power that simple choices like the layout of furniture or the color of paint can have. In what ways can schools, in their architecture and design, more resemble places of comfort, safety, and belonging? It is no coincidence that many of the SDL theorists of the last century have modeled their learning spaces on the idea of *home*. In designing with the learner in mind, take intentional care to move away from the institutional/factory/prison aesthetic and more towards a space that is welcoming, comforting, and nurturing.

That being said, there is more to a school's *environment* than the things that can be seen and touched. Structures, like schedules, rules, and curricula, often govern a space. What do these look like in SDL spaces? Bouchard (2009) identified the following "algorithmic" factors that need to be considered with designed an SDL environment:[23]

- *Sequencing:* What are the steps to completing the learning task? How much freedom in the sequencing does the learner have versus what boundaries around sequencing are set by the educator?

[22] I have worked at a school in the Acton Academy network. The school started in a small farmhouse in the rural south. It was not uncommon for learners to work in rocking chairs on the porch or hang hammocks on the trees on the property.

[23] Bouchard uses the term *algorithmic* in place of *pedagogical*, as the latter signifies typical teacher work. By using the term *algorithmic*, Bouchard is referring to broad-level forms and structures of learning that can be controlled by the teacher, learner, or combination of the two.

- *Pacing:* Are there hard deadlines to completing a project, or is it self-paced? Who determines the pacing and why?
- *Formulating objectives:* What is the desired goal or outcome? Who sets the goal? What are the consequences of meeting or failing to meet the goal?
- *Resources:* Must the learner use certain resources? Are they expected to find their own? Who decides? What resources are provided and how are the accessed?
- *Following up:* When and how is progress measured? What's the role of the educator in keeping track of the learning project? In what ways are learners meant to measure and reflect upon their own progress?
- *Evaluation:* Who evaluates "the learning?" Does the learner self-evaluate their work? Is it peer-reviewed? Does an educator evaluate it, or an outside third party?

These are often the factors of an SDL environment that differentiate the space from traditional schools. A school can be housed in a beautiful, inspiring space but still be teacher-controlled. These "algorithmic" factors, as Bouchard called them, provide the balance of structure and agency in a learning environment.

Another distinguishing factor in SDL spaces is how rules are made and enforced. In the previous chapter, the democratic process at Sudbury Valley School and Summerhill was explored (Greenberg, 1987; Neil, 1960). Every learner at the school has a vote (equal to the adults in the school) on what the rules are and the consequences for breaking them. At Acton Academy, learners are divided into multi-age classes called *studios* (generally an elementary, middle, and high school studio) (Sandefer, 2018). Each year, each studio goes through a process of creating a "Contract of Promises" that set the rules and expectations for the group. Each studio also decides on how they hold each other accountable to those promises. For older learners, at

the high school or college level, Knowles' (1977) idea of learning contracts may be employed. A theme across Summerhill, Sudbury Valley, and Acton Academy is that rules are not made by adults and enforced from the top down, but rather emerge from the learners themselves as they reflect on the type of environment they want to create and experience every day. Self-governance can be messy and complex, as detailed in the last chapter's section on free schools, many of whom moved away from democratic governance models because of their inefficiencies.

What sort of *work* happens in SDL spaces? It might be helpful to start by comparing the work of learners in SDL spaces with those in traditional classrooms. Postman and Weingartner (1969) offered this observation of classwork over fifty years ago:

> Now, what is it that students *do* in the classroom? Well, mostly they sit and listen to the teacher. Mostly, they are required to believe in authorities, or at least pretend to such belief when they take tests. Mostly they are required to *remember*. They are almost never required to make observations, formulate definitions, or perform any intellectual operations that go beyond repeating what someone else says is true. They are rarely encouraged to ask substantive questions, although they are permitted to ask about administrative and technical details. (How long should the paper be? Does spelling count? When is the assignment due?). It is practically unheard of for students to play any role in determining what problems are worth studying or what procedures of inquiry ought to be used. (p. 20, italics in original)

This approach is still the de facto way of education in many school environments, public and private alike. However, there is a wide spectrum of what *work* looks like in self-directed environments.

On one end of the spectrum are places like Summerhill and Sudbury Valley.[24] These schools offer no compulsory curricula, no standardized body of work that learners must take on and master. Instead, effort is made to provide learners with an array of educative options that they may or may not take up. Summerhill offers classes that learners can choose to opt into (Neill, 1960). At Sudbury Valley School, learners may enter into an agreement with an instructor to establish a course around certain curriculum, but it is on the learner to initiate the agreement and is requisite on the terms agreed to between the learner and instructor (Greenberg, 1987). Other places vary in the designs of their curriculum. Albany Free School states that their curriculum "is co-created by students, teachers, and parents" (*Free to learn,* n.d.). Boyles (2020) outlines the instructional approach of Chrysalis Experiential Academy in Roswell, Georgia. Though there was subject-specific instruction (math, history, art, and so on), instructors sought to engage learners in authentic projects that span across curricula. Boyles writes that "Deweyan education still has the classes, but they are blended and centered on projects that cross boundaries and integrate rather than divide" (p. 31). At Chrysalis, this project-based learning occurred largely from unprompted experiences. In one example, a student brought in a military relic, which resulted in a cross-curricular project that spanned history, English, and art as students structured a military museum. Another occurrence happened when a donor gifted the school with antique books. Students were brought into the conversation to figure out the value of the books and what to with them (auction them, preserve them in a library, or something else?). In examples like this, students are still growing in their skills of math, reading, and writing and their knowledge of history, but those skills are being directed at a present problem to form an immediate solution. In such scenarios, students are less likely to ask the timeworn question,

[24] See Chapter Two for an overview of these learning environments.

"When will I use this in real life?" and instead are more likely to notice *how* they use the knowledge and skills they gain in the present. A common question raised about such environments tends to be: *But what does this type of learning look like in public schools?* It is an assumption that only private schools can offer freedom in curriculum and learning experience. There are a couple of exemplars of public SDL schools.

An interesting experiment of employing SDL pedagogies in a public school began in Jefferson County, Colorado in 1970. A group of parents approached the school district with a request to open an alternative school option. Rick Posner (2009) tells the story of the school in his book *Lives of Passion, School of Hope.* The school, the Jefferson County Open School (usually just referred to as the Open School), would focus on "developing the whole person," not just academics (p. 10). The staff and students co-created the school in the early 1970s, putting forth the following goals for their space:

- Rediscover the joy of learning
- Engage in the search for meaning in your life
- Adapt to the world that is
- Prepare for the world that might be
- Help create the world that ought to be (p. 10)

Alongside of these goals, the school had five learner outcomes. Each learner was "expected to become an effective communicator, a complex thinker, a responsible citizen, an ethical person, and a quality worker" (p. 10). Those are lofty goals and outcomes. How did the Open School plan to achieve them?

The first step was the positioning of everyone involved as a *learner first and foremost*. Parents, teachers, administrators, students, and janitors were all perceived as a community of

learners. Secondly, the school functioned on a system of democracy. Students were represented proportionally on a governing council, and the council decided such decisions as hiring/firing personnel, course offerings, and the curriculum used. Third, the Open School is centered on SDL pedagogies and cultivates SDL skills in teachers and students (remember, everyone is a *learner* first). The school identified the following quadrants of learning:

	Formal Learning	**Informal Learning**
In School	**Planned learning in-school** Formal learning that occurs in classrooms, lecture halls, laboratories, workshops, presentations, etc.	**Unplanned learning in-school** Informal learning that occurs in spontaneous discussions, socialization in the halls and cafeteria, or unexpected events in formal settings such as a laboratory project that does not go as planned, etc.
Out of School	**Planned learning out-of-school** Learning that occurs at conferences, field trips, internships, apprenticeships, family trips, work, etc.	**Unplanned learning out-of-school** Learning that occurs through time spent with friends and family, travel without formal agendas, sports activities, playing, reading, etc.

Table 3.1: Adapted from Posner (2009, p. 13).

So, for the Open School, learning activities like lectures are not contrary to SDL, but fit within it. Each high school student is assigned an advisor that assists that student in building a Mutually Agreed-upon Program (MAP) for their high school career. The MAP may involve a web of traditionally-styled courses that focus heavy on lectures, collaborative labs and workshops, internships and apprenticeships outside of school, and other learning activities. To graduate at The Open School, learners must complete six "passages" — self-directed projects in the areas of creativity, practical skills, logical inquiry, adventure, career exploration, and global awareness (p. 15). No passage looks the same for any two students. The Open School does not give grades or offer traditional transcripts. Graduates must write their own narrative transcript, documenting

their learning journey at The Open School and making an argument as to why they are ready for life in the real world. Posner (2009) noted that 91% of alumni surveyed had attended college.

Another experimental public school, The Center for Self-Directed Learning, opened in 1972 in a Chicago suburb (Bellanco, Paul, & Paul, 2014). "The Center," as it was known, was a school-within-a-school, housed in New Trier East High School. The founding staff of the school were deeply influenced by Carl Roger's (1969) *Freedom to Learn*, a text that made strong arguments for self-directed learning and inspired researchers and practitioners to more deeply explore SDL in the subsequent decades. The Center was established as an alternative school within an already established high school. As Bellanco, Paul, and Paul (2014) observed: "Unlike today, when the term 'alternative' refers to a place to assign especially troublesome special needs students, this experimental program embraced all students who wanted to enter," (p. 2). As far as curriculum went, students at the center did have to complete certain state-required courses, but it was up to the student and their faculty advisor as to how to complete the course. In general, a student of The Center had to prove they had mastered self-directed learning in order to graduate. To do this, there was a seven-step process:

> Students would have to show their proficiencies to make an authentic goal of high personal importance, find resources (wherever or whatever those may be in a range of learning experiences from one course in the parent school per semester to internships, field studies, small group investigations, a research study, or travel to Italy), identify a facilitator/evaluator (wherever or whomever had the expertise from The Center, the parent school, community college or university faculty member, practicing artists, parents, businesspersons, medical researchers, inventors, etc.), follow a self-planned weekly schedule, produce evidence of learning, assess that learning with criteria, and

> show how the specific learning contributed to college preparation, life, and/or career goals which the students were also forming at the same time. (p. 4)

The Center of Self-Directed Learning would only live to see 10 years. It closed its doors in 1982 against the backdrop of the Cold War, the "Back to Basics" movement in education, and the lead up to the *Nation at Risk* report published in 1983. Educational discourse in the U.S. at this time became hyper-focused on competitiveness, college acceptance, and career placement. The experiment at The Center, though short lived, produced 600 graduates who had gone through the process of showcasing that they were indeed self-directed learners. Bellanca, Paul, and Paul's (2014) book *Becoming Self-Directed Learners* features written testimony of 50 of those learners, reflecting about how the time at The Center changed their lives.

What this section has highlighted is that the learner led environments look and feel drastically different than traditional schools. There is attention to the physical environment itself, which is intentionally meant to look and feel less like an institution and more like a home, studio, coffee shop, or laboratory. There are also non-physical factors that affect an environment. What are the rules that govern the space and who makes them? What kind of work is accomplished and why? What are the resources provided and who chooses them? In what ways is work evaluated and presented? What is clear from this brief survey is that the environment and learning experiences offered are key factors in cultivating SDL. Now, what about the role of the educator?

Where's the Teacher?: Guides, Facilitators, and the Role of Adults in SDL

If learners are going to guide their own learning, then does that negate the need of a teacher? The goal of formal education should be to guide learners in taking increasing

responsibility for their own learning.[25] Van der Walt (2019) argued that "the potential to become a self-directed learner has to be developed through the agency, stewardship, and caring guidance of more mature and experienced people in the persons of educators such as teachers," (p . 15). Havenga (2016) has also argued that it is the responsibility of the teacher to help the learner develop explicit skills in goal setting, applying the right strategies, and reflecting on learning. Learning that is self-directed does not negate the need for guidance, mentorship, encouragement, and support from caring adults. Rather, the aim is to build independence and autonomy of learners so that they are able to increasingly take responsibility for their learning.

Confessore and Park (2004) put forward the idea of Functional Learner Autonomy, a person's ability and willingness to guide their own learner. They argued that "the degree to which an individual is engaged in functional learner autonomy is expressed in the extent to which the learner optimizes the learning process by making efficient and appropriate use of personal resources and the resources of others" (p. 42). Functional Leaner Autonomy is on a spectrum, with Dysfunctional Learner Dependence (a learner can do very little without guidance from others) on one side of the spectrum and Dysfunctional Learner Independence (a learner has difficulty in accepting help or guidance) on the other. An individual's Functional Learner Autonomy is the space where they feel empowered "to participate in selecting and shaping learning projects in which the learner may function independently or in concert with others" (p. 42). A role of the educator is to, through environment, experiences, and guidance, support learners toward their own autonomy.

[25] Researchers like Fisher, King, And Tague (2001) have studied SDL in nursing education, arguing that a teacher is needed to explicitly teach both the necessary content and the skills of SDL and that learners gradually take more responsibility for their education as they progress.

This argument — that learners exist on a spectrum of self-directedness or autonomy — also influenced the work of Thompson and Wulff (2004). These researchers noticed a lack of readiness for learners in intermediate and advanced level chemistry classes to direct their own learning.[26] Students who were otherwise high achieving struggled in courses that were intentionally structured with SDL pedagogies in mind. Through the process of action research, Thompson and Wulff identified the following needs: 1.) learners needed explicit instruction in the background and processes of SDL; 2.) SDL goals needed to be connected to the project and course outcomes, and 3.) a diverse set of guided, explicit resources needed to be made available to learners. Acting on those needs, Thompson and Wulff developed Guided Self-Directed Learning (GSDL) strategies.

GSDL is defined as "a continuum of instructor-student responsibility and action during learning experiences" (p. 42). Thompson and Wulff identify three key GSDL strategies:

1. *Developing a diverse set of "guides."* These guides are envisioned as compendiums of resources that learners can pull from during their learning project. The instructor then makes explicit reference to these guides, explains what they contain and how they should be used, and updates them as necessary. To be most effective, these guides should exist in multiple modalities.
2. *Personal reflections.* Throughout the learning project, learners are invited to engage in reflection and self-evaluation. These can be public or private, but the goal is to provoke a meta-cognitive process where a learner thinks about their own learning.
3. *Shared construction*. Learners work together with the instructor to determine which content is self-taught, which is delivered peer-to-peer, and which comes from the

[26] McCauley & McClelland (2004) found similar trends in studying a group of physics students in Ireland.

instructor. This process allows for everyone in the learning project to negotiate responsibility.

Through their action research design, Thompson and Wulff (2004) argued that by embracing GSDL strategies in these chemistry courses, reciprocity was built between instructors and students: "The instructor became a student of teaching strategies that engaged student's self-directed learning. Teaching students to learn became as important as teaching the subject matter" (p. 50).

SDL necessitates a reimagining of the role of a teacher. It is a common understanding that a teacher is a holder of knowledge and their job is to transmit this knowledge to students. Freire (1970/1996) referred to this as the "banking concept of education" where "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider himself knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing," (p. 53). What researchers like Thompson and Wulff (2004) have argued is that, rather than being a mere conduit of content, teachers can help students *learn how to learn*.

As such, some SDL spaces have created different nomenclature around the concept of *teacher*. Acton Academy, for example, uses the term *guides* (Sandefer, 2018). A guide is envisioned as a caring adult that oversees SDL learning spaces. Guides at Acton Academies remain in Socratic mode 100% of the time — they never lecture or teach explicit skills, nor do they answer questions. Instead, they respond with directed questions that in turn prompt the learner toward resources, strategies, or deeper self-reflection (often through Socratic questioning). Ivan Illich (1971) also used the term "educational guide" (p. 99). Other spaces may use terms like *facilitator* or *advisor.* As seen previously, spaces like Summerhill and Sudbury Valley can have classes taught by teachers, but attendance is either optional or arranged through a contract between a learner and the teachers. Coming from the field of adult education,

Knowles (1986) employed "learning contracts," which was an agreement between the teacher and the learner on the learning objective, resources to be utilized, timelines, and method of evaluation.

There are teachers seeking to embody SDL pedagogies in more traditional school spaces. Katherine Thorsteinson (2018), for example, used SDL to embrace what she saw as "anarchy" in the classroom in the months following the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president and to bolster her use of critical whiteness pedagogy in her courses. (p. 40). She, as a white woman, felt that explicitly handing over authority and responsibility to the learners was a way to create emancipatory spaces. This decentering of authority was all the more relevant because her courses were on topics of race. She argued:

> Rather than taking a top-down approach through lectures and readings, I decided to infuse course design with the diversity already populating my class. I thus embraced models of self-directed learning (SDL) to extend agency and responsibility among my students. (p. 40)

Research suggests that people who are engaged in their own anti-racist education are more likely to spot their own bias, privilege, and internalized oppression, whereas they may be more likely to become defensive if the education is other-directed (Weber, 2010). Thorsteinson invited her learners to share in the construction of assignments, the choice of weekly readings, and the evaluation of work. She concluded, "There are reasons to believe that SDL is a useful tool for decentering authority, which may be appropriate when white teachers lead courses on race topics" (p. 55).

While there were self-directed elements of this coursework, this class was administered by a teacher and taken along with peers. The work was as diverse as the students present, but it

still served as a sort of mosaic and had a groundedness in community. Thorsteinson's course also had intention behind it — students could not go through the course without exploring race, encountering certain themes, texts, and media, and presenting their projects to the group. This provided a boundedness, where SDL functioned within a larger whole, respecting the need for people to both *learn from* and be *taught by*.

Another study on using SDL within traditional environments came from Currie-Knight, Zambone, and Mock (2020). They followed students in a senior level education course in a teacher training program. The course was structured with an SDL focus, where students were allowed to choose their resources to utilize and their projects to complete. The researchers discovered the students encountered many mental barriers to entering into an SDL space in an otherwise teacher-centric program. One student reported their hesitation:

> I really love grades and like structure and love being told rubrics and being told exactly what to do. That is where I thrive in terms of school goes but I was really nervous because I thought I was not going to have any structure, not going to know what I am doing. (p. 40)

The researchers found that the anxieties that students reported feeling at first entering the course were mitigated by gaining practice in an SDL environment, simply choosing their first project and beginning work, and re-imagining the role of the professor in the classroom as a resource to utilize, not as an authority to satisfy. To become a self-directed learner meant unlearning the habits and expectations that came from experience in other-directed learning environments.

In the previous chapter, Biesta's (2016) argument against the *learnification* in education was outlined. His critique of what he viewed as an overemphasis on the concept of *learning* in education and a devaluing of *teaching* is based on this idea that humans lose their subjectivity —

they become nameless *learners*, driven to and fro by the winds of ever-changing market demands.[27] Knowles (1975), who pioneered SDL in adult education, found a great deal of freedom in reimagining his classrooms as SDL spaces:

> It required that I divest myself of the protective shield of an authority figure and expose myself as *me* — an authentic human being, with feelings, hopes, aspirations, insecurities, worries, strengths, and weaknesses. It required that I be clear about what resources I did and did not have that might be useful to the learners, and that I make the resources I did have available to them on their terms. (p. 34)

For Knowles, this shift in his role, from teacher to facilitator of learning, was a way to *re-humanize* himself in the classroom. Just as Knowles felt the need to loosen his grasp on authority, Biesta (2016) felt the need for it to be reclaimed. "The educational question," he argued, "is about what it is that we want to give authority to; it is about deciding what it is that we want to have authority in our lives," (p. 55). Teachers, in Biesta's view, are not "disposable and dispensable resources for learning," but should venture to provoke, interrupt, and draw forth the thinking of students in their tutelage (p. 57).

In the ideological tug of war between whether there is more value in *being taught* or *learning from*, perhaps there is a way to smash the ideas together. Biesta would decry such a move and would probably point out that *that is currently the problem* in his mind: a false equivalency between *learning* and *education*. What is proposed here is not so much a joining of the terms, so that teaching and learning lose their distinctions, but rather to dialectically fuse them in such a way that, though inseparable, they keep all of their peculiarities.

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[27] See Chapter Two.

Michel Foucault (1978, 1980, 1995) put forward the concept of power/knowledge, the idea that one cannot separate power and what counts as knowledge and the idea of *truth* (1995, p. 27-28). Power and knowledge are inseparable, always connected, and always present. “Power is everywhere,” he argued, “not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere,” (1978, p. 93). Power is dynamic and relational, not something that is “acquired, seized, or shared,” (p. 94). With this framework in mind — that power exists in relationship and cannot be claimed or given away — then the *authority* that should be divested by the teacher in Knowles’s view of self-directed learning and that should be reclaimed in Biesta’s philosophy of education loses its substance.

Perhaps there is a way to create space to “decenter authority” as Thorsteinson (2018) sought to do in her classroom. Knowles (1975) wrote that giving up the mantle of *teacher* offered new ways to be “an authentic human being” in the classroom (p. 34). Perhaps, though, this relief was not at the giving up the title of *teacher* per se, but a particular way of being and performing the role of teacher. Freire has already argued for a collapse of the binary between *learner* and *teacher*. He argued that “education must begin with the solution to the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students,” (p. 53). He goes on:

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in the dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which they all grow. In this process, arguments based on “authority” are

> no longer valid...Here no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world. (p. 61)

This is perhaps the clearest articulation of the new spaces opened up by bringing together Knowles's call for SDL and Biesta's objection to the rise of learning and loss of teaching in current education discourse. John Holt (1967/2017) put it this way:

> What we need to do, and all we need to do, is bring as much of the world as we can into the school and the classroom; give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking; and then get out of the way. We can trust them with the rest. (p. 282)

The educator in an SDL space, then, should constantly be looking for opportunities to hand responsibility off to learners then get out of the way.

Achieving Equity: SDL and the De-"Tracking" of Education

Paulo Freire (1970/1996) argued that education really only has one of two outcomes: conformity or freedom. He wrote:

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (p. 16)

As has already been shown, traditional education systems in the United States run along the twin rails of *accountability* and *compliance*, thus stifling freedom and promoting conformity.[28] This approach has maintained a societal status quo, as the norm students are being molded into and

[28] See Chapter One.

measured against most largely resembles white dominant culture (Kendi, 2017). Wallis (2016) pointed to research from the Brookings Institute that showed that the average black student attends a school that ranks in 37th percentile in national academic achievement, while white students attend schools ranked in the 60th percentile.[29]

It is well documented that white supremacist ideology permeated the founding of this country and was perpetuated through educational institutions (Kendi, 2017; Orfield, 2001; Perry & McConney, 2010; Wallis, 2016). In particular, students of color:

- Attend schools that rank lower in national academic achievement than their white counterparts (Orfield, 2001; Perry & McConney, 2010).
- Are "tracked" lower than their white counterparts, despite achievement levels (Hallinan & Oaks, 1994).
- Are suspended at higher rates than white students (Anyon et al., 2014).
- Experience barriers to trust, belonging, and self-esteem (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Fiske et al., 2014).
- Navigate identity threats and hostile learning environments (Calabrese, 1990; Delpit, 2006; Perry et al., 2004; Steele, 2011).
- Have higher dropout rates than their white peers (Balfanz et al., 2012; Chapman et al., 2011).

Sue (2010) argued that these racist systems and the outcomes they cultivated produced three dangerous ideologies in education, that students of color: lack motivation for self-improvement, are intellectually inferior, and have a propensity for misbehaving and criminality when measured

[29] This is not an argument for school rankings, just an observation using the data they provided.

against their white peers. These are the results of an education approach that prioritizes accountability and compliance. How might SDL pedagogies speak to these issues?

Kenner et al. (2020) argued that:

> [F]reedom and democracy are necessary conditions for human flourishing, and in turn, prerequisites for self-directed learning. However, in many regards our history in the United States has not been one of freedom nor, its counterpart, democracy. In fact, our society through our educational institutions, regularly pipelines our children into prisons, unemployment, and other societal traps, rather than acknowledging and developing their cultural capital and building their intellectual capacities. (p. 16)

How might freedom and democracy be reclaimed by schools? Raab (2017) argued that there are four leverage points for providing equitable opportunities for flourishing:

- Each and every person should have freedom to make choices over their own lives
- Each and every person should have their core needs met
- All options available should be equally accessible to all
- Ensure every person develops the skills and capacities to make meaningful choices for themselves.

These indeed are aspirational goals. How do SDL environments enact equitable learning experiences?

Part of this work is indebted to Bourdieu's (1973) theory of social reproduction. He argued that "the educational system produces all the more perfectly the structures of the distribution of cultural capital among classes…in that the culture it transmits is closer to the dominant culture" (p. 78). The school system, then, is the main mechanism in reproducing the status quo among classes, perpetuating generation after generation of inequities and injustices by

moving capital (social, economic, and cultural) continually to the dominant class. Other researchers have honed Bourdieu's theories in examining the role schools play in reproducing inequities (Espenshade & Radford, 2013; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Stevens, 2007). How then may schools disrupt this cycle of social reproduction?

The first step is re-imagining the *why* of school. If the reason for school is to move students towards economic ends, where some will land high-paying jobs and achieve some sort of coveted socioeconomic status while others are tracked toward different career paths, then it follows that schools will serve as sorting mechanisms, rewarding those with the most social, cultural, and economic capital with access to even more. However, if school instead is seen as a place aimed at human flourishing, then different models of schooling are required. Raab (2017) argued that:

> You cannot engineer humans, you have to cultivate them. School is not about producing, engineering, or making students. Fundamentally, the design of schooling is about creating environments in which people can grow, flourish, and learn to live together, not about creating people. (p. 105)

For schools to truly become equity enablers, then whole model transformation is required. Working within the current system to widen the pathways to successful outcomes for learners lacking social, cultural, and economic capital will not change the overall role of schools as centers of social reproduction.

Schools centered on cultivating flourishing humans who are empowered to cultivate flourishing societies, then, are not places where students are seen (and evaluated) as vessels to be filled with certain knowledge to equip them for whatever future their "track" is leading them toward. Instead, these sorts of schools have as their aim *emancipation*.

Biesta (2016) built off of the framework of Paulo Freire (1970/1996) in putting forth his own idea of emancipation. Rather than the teacher-as-emancipator dynamic, which has "colonial" (Andretti, 2011) tendencies, Biesta (2016) viewed emancipation as a "process of the collective discovery of oppressive structures, processes, and practices," (p. 71). Freire (1970/1996) saw oppression as a break between the individual and the world, a type of "dehumanization" in which the oppressed lost their subjectiveness, becoming mere objects to the oppressor (p. 135). So, emancipation here is a collective, generative effort. The teacher is not the emancipator, coming from a place of authority and superiority to deliver people out of oppression. "The role of the teacher in this process," Biesta (2016) argued, "is to reinstigate dialogical and reflective practices that in turn...reconnect people back to the world," (p. 72). Self-directed learning is a way to create spaces for this work to happen, as Freire (1996) argued, "while no one liberates himself by his own efforts, neither is he liberated by others," (p. 48). For this work to happen, we need both teachers and learners.

Part of creating more equitable learning environments is mitigating teacher bias, even in SDL spaces. Long and Agyekum (1983) conducted a validation study of the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS).[30] They looked at a sample size of 136 college students spread out over 10 college courses. Each student was given the SDLRS among other individual assessments. Additionally, the instructors for the courses were asked to rate their learners as to how well they displayed SDL skills in the class. What Long and Agyekum found was that there was a large disparity between how students rated themselves on the SDLRS and ratings they received from their instructors. After analyzing the data, they conclude that "the major explanatory variable seems to be the racial composition of the groups," (p. 81). Black students

[30] The SDLRS is given a brief overview in Chapter One and briefly explained toward the beginning of this chapter. See Guglielmino (1977) for more information.

rated themselves as high on the SDLRS, but received lower ratings from their instructors on their self-direction (regardless of the instructor's race). White students tended to rate their own readiness for SDL lower, but received higher instructor ratings. Long and Agyekum point out this discrepancy but fail to call into question systematic racism or instructor bias. Rather, they chalked the variation up to a difference in "cultural groups" and argue that their comments on the findings are brief "because of the speculative nature of any explanation that might be put forth in this area," (p. 84).

Due to the questions brought up by this study, Long and Agyekum (1984) designed an additional study that was published a year later. They repeated much of the same design but expanded the instructor rating in the hopes of increasing its objectivity and sensitivity to readiness in self-directed learning. Again, they found discrepancy between the self-evaluation of the learners and the evaluations by the instructors: "In both studies black subjects were rated lower than white subjects and older subjects were rated higher than younger ones. It is possible that faculty may be influenced in their rating of students by characteristics that have nothing to do with self-directing characteristics," (p. 714). This acknowledgement is as close as the authors get to naming racial bias as a factor in the instructor ratings. Instead, they punt the topic to future scholars, concluding: "Based on the results of the two studies…associations between race and faculty ratings on self-direction in learning and the role of age in self-direction in learning are prime topics for study," (p. 715).

Moving agency, responsibility, and evaluation of learning from a teacher to learners themselves, mitigates against bias that exists institutionally and with figures of authority. In SDL spaces, learners typically are seen as co-creators of their learning environment, are democratically engaged in deciding the rules and consequence structure, and have a choice in

their learning projects. In this way, school becomes a place where all students can grow and flourish; not just those that administrators place on "tracks" to success.

Freedom and Responsibility: SDL and Learner Agency

> Humans have an unparalleled capability to become many things. The qualities that are cultivated and the life paths that realistically become open to them are partly determined by the nature of the cultural agencies to which their development is entrusted. Social systems that cultivate generalizable competencies, create opportunity structures, provide aidful resources, and allow room for self-directedness increase the chances that people will realize what they wish to become. (Bandura, 1989, p. 57)

The freedom to *choose for oneself* is a key component of SDL. Rogers (1961) argued that "self-directing means that one chooses — and then learns from the consequences" (p. 171). Schwartz (2004), though, in his book *The Paradox of Choice,* argued that the abundance of choice now offered to the average individual was debilitating rather than freeing. He wrote that "when self-determination is carried to extremes, it leads not to *freedom* of choice but to *tyranny* of choice" (pp. 80-81). He called this *choice overload*. With the influx of the internet and learning technologies, it is now possible to seek out just about any type of learning experience. Schwartz argued that people generally fall into two camps: the *maximizers* who become fixated on the "best" choice, and the *satisficers* who are satisfied with a "merely excellent" choice even if it is not the "absolute best" (p. 78).

Brockett (2006) applied Schwartz's argument to SDL arguing that facilitators of SDL need to support learners in building decision making strategies. He offered up the following as helpful tips for SDL educators to pass on to learners:

1. List out your goals

2. Weigh the importance of each goal
3. Lay out multiple pathways to meeting your goals
4. Evaluate each pathway on how well it enables you to meet your goals
5. Choose the option you think is most ideal
6. Afterwards, reflect on the consequences of your choice and what sort of changes you would make in your choice evaluation process in the future (p. 31)

In Brockett's view, the teacher/instructor/facilitator/guide has responsibility in helping learners confront the paradox of choice. He argued that "self-directed learning is about freedom, autonomy, and choice. It also is about doing" (p. 33). When the choice impedes the path to action, then an intervention may be needed.

Based upon this, Hiemstra and Brockett (2012) developed what they referred to as the Person Process Context (PPC) model of SDL. A person's self-directedness is a result of three intersecting elements. *Person* refers to all of the things that make up an individual: background, life experiences, psychological factors, and personality traits. *Process* is the actual structure and approach to learning (the role of the teacher, the resources provided, the learning design, class expectations, etc.). *Context* refers to the sociopolitical factors at play, including culture, class, peer interactions, and learning environment. According to Hiemstra and Brockett, SDL requires the right mixture of these three things: a person who has (or is in the process of developing) the skills of self-direction, a learning process designed to cultivate (or allow for) self-direction, and a context that is supportive and encouraging of self-direction (rather than deleterious or mitigating).

Different SDL environments take different approaches to the concepts of freedom, agency, and responsibility, with some existing on the side of the spectrum which grants learners

complete (or near complete) agency of their learning and others that provide more "guardrails" around learner freedom. Rousseau's approach would be to apply no (or as little as possible) external pressures on the individual, but rather to grant that individual freedom to make their own choices and learn from them. Most other SDL and SDL-adjacent theories summarized in this dissertation (see Chapter Two) put more responsibility on the part of the teacher/educator to guide the learning toward certain desired outcomes. Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Montessori, and others aimed for learners in their care to learn the basics of reading, writing, and mathematics. Others, like Neill and Greenberg, may not have required certain curriculum or instruction for their learners, but still placed requirements on those that graduated their schools. This graduation requirement was usually met through some sort of cumulative presentation to the community, providing proofs that one was ready to be a meaningful contributor to society. These presentations may or may not have required some mastery of basic academics. At the very least, the person had to be a strong communicator, able to showcase they were ready to move into the world and worthy of the blessing of the school community.

All that to say, there are inherent tensions within this history of SDL. The line of thought development has never been neat and clean. It is pretty easy to see influences (Rousseau to Froebel to Dewey to Neill to Greenberg), but each iteration of learner led theory differs quite substantially from its predecessors. Also, theories and movements that exist contemporarily were often times sabotaged by their own conflicts and in-fighting (look at the Free School Movement in Chapter Two). What has remained consistent, though, the through line from Aristotle to contemporary SDL spaces, is putting the impetus for learning in the hands of the learner. People are naturally curious. They want to learn, are compelled to learn, by their own nature. Societies do not need to impose learning on children. What is needed is continued understanding (using

these exemplars from the past and present as guidance) in how to move agency and responsibility quickly and consistently toward the direction of the learner. It should be noted (if it is not clear already) that this is not an argument for chaos or anarchy (though in a truly learner led space, both will be present at some point). Moving agency and responsibility to children is not a sanction of "anything goes," nor does it abdicate adults in society (parents, educators, leaders) in their responsibility to teach, guide, and cultivate. What is interesting, though, is that in learner led environments, behavior and class management tend not to require much energy from the adults in the space. If learners have had a hand in designing the space, the rules, and the work, they are invested in maintaining their communities.

"Staying Competitive": SDL and Market Forces

The connection between SDL and the push for school privatization cannot be ignored. Jerry Kirkpatrick (2008) 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 "[t]o instill in the young a purpose in life is the fundamental aim of education" and that "[p]urpose in life is defined by one's chosen values, especially career" (p. 110). 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 idea runs contrary to much of what Dewey and Montessori envisioned as education (see Chapter Two for a more detailed analysis of their education philosophies). Progressive reformers, 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. These figures are labeled *reformers* not because they were giving up on the notion of public education, but because they were 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" (p. 12).

What leads to this conclusion? Kirkpatrick grounds 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" (p. 18).[31] 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," (p. 22).

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 (1982) 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" (p. 128, italics in original). 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

[31] Kirkpatrick's arguments against compulsory education will be further explore in Chapter Five. This present chapter will focus on his argument for free-market education.

some of the citizen's children is clearly a violation of this premise," Kirkpatrick (2008) 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" (p. 109). 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 is a staple that everyone who has children must budget for" (p. 181).

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 are examples of public schools (Bellanco, Paul, & Paul, 2014; Posner, 2009). 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. This tension was highlighted in Chapter Two as Knowles (1975) argued that SDL skills were a necessity demanded by the market and Biesta (2016) argued that the discourse of *learnification* was fueling anti-democratic sentiments in education. Wain (2006) 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. (p. 40)

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

Up to this point in the dissertation, the goal has been to survey what *others* have said and argued about in SDL research, both historical and contemporary. Starting here, and continuing in the following chapters, I will begin to infuse my own articulations of SDL. This is the turning point of the study, when the focus shifts from surveying the history and the literature to making my own arguments for a type of SDL pedagogy. Before I can fully outline a view of SDL as an education system that seeks both individual and social flourishing (this will be the thrust of Chapter Four), I must first guard against the inherent dangers that the libertarian views of education as a private good pose to our democracy. Therefore, this chapter will conclude with an impassioned defense of education as a public good, equally accessible to all.

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 under-funded 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, knowledgeable of foundational scientific knowledge and a broad understanding of world history. Yes, the public school system in general (and my former school in particular) need a major re-imagining. The arguments presented so far in this dissertation (and those that will be laid out in the next chapter) attest to this fact and highlight some ways forward. 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 premium for it.

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). A possible explanation for this phenomenon 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 90^{th} and 50^{th} 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 them, to, as a society, aspire to have 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. Lourie (2020) argued that this "over-emphasis on skills and competencies and…under-emphasis on disciplinary knowledge means that students may struggle to achieve deeper levels of learning" (p. 125). Recent political events in the U.S. highlight what happens when a population is disconnected from a critical examination of history,

who have failed in their educational journeys 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 dissertation argues for 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 the centuries of education theory presented in the last chapter and the contemporary research surveyed in the present chapter, provide a way to enact an education system that fosters both the individual skills needed to *learn for oneself* and the community-centered competencies to *learn to live together*. The next chapter will focus on building out this vision of education. For now, the point to be made is that 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 claim 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? Once again, history provides some assistance in illuminating potential pathways forward. In the last chapter, the story of John Dewey's laboratory school at the University of Chicago was briefly outlined. 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, 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.

Likewise, the proliferation of SDL spaces in recent years provides ample opportunities for researchers, policy makers, and pedagogues to see learner led education in action. For this reason, I co-founded an institute housed within a small SDL school. The goal of the institute 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 (how can teachers in public schools make micro-moves towards SDL in their own classrooms?), part of the work is 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 policy makers someday 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 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. For the latter to be true, the disparate strands of SDL pedagogies need to be synthesized into a clear articulation. There are those that have stressed education as a means of individual flourishing (Rousseau) and those that have stressed its importance in shaping society (Mann), with a wide range of philosophies in between. What is called for now is a both/and approach. Education must exist both for the individual and for society. The next chapter will work to outline such an approach.

4 EUDAIMONIA AND DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLING

The aim of this study was to put forward a view of education that leads both to individual flourishing and to the strengthening of our social contracts. Other views of education prioritize the developing of marketable skills, mastering arbitrary content knowledge, meeting the needs of emerging industry, and keeping the U.S. globally competitive. Chapter Two detailed the long and varied history of what I am referring to as self-directed learning (SDL). Chapter Three outlined current research around SDL and explored the factors at play in an SDL space, namely the role of the environment, the roles of the educator, and the role of learning experiences. This chapter will build upon the history, theory, and school design so far presented in order to close in on the central claim of this dissertation as a whole: SDL fosters a view of education that cultivates both individual and societal flourishing.

As detailed in Chapter Two, John Dewey's laboratory school, established at the University of Chicago at the turn of the 20th century, was a place devoted to the flourishing of both the individual and society. Katherine Mayhew and Anna Edwards (1936) chronicled their time as instructors at the school. In the introduction to the book by Mayhew and Edwards, John Dewey argued that the book not only had historical value in documenting the lab school years, but that it also spoke to the present and future of education. The pedagogies that drove the establishment of the school 40 years prior to the publication of this book were just as urgent to the book's present audience as they were at the time of the school's founding. I would argue that these pedagogies are just as timely now. Dewey wrote in the book's introduction:

> There is one point in particular which may be singled out for its present bearing. The problem of the relation between individual freedom and collective well-being is today urgent and acute. The problem of achieving both of these values without the sacrifice of

> either is likely to be *the dominant problem of civilization for many years to come*. The schools have their part to play in working out the solution, and their chief task is to create a form of community life and organization in which both of these values are preserved. (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936, p. xv, italics added for emphasis)

Dewey saw the need of creating and maintaining an education system that fosters both the liberty of the individual and the well-being of society as the dominant problem of civilization (also noting that this problem was long-term, with no immediate solution on the horizon). That being the case, it is unlikely that a solution will be adequately reached in the pages of this dissertation. Nonetheless, an effort will be made to show that such a view of education is viable and worth working toward.

The Claim

This chapter is where the proverbial rubber meets the road. So far, historical variations of SDL have been presented to show that these pedagogies were not invented by alternative education designers in the 2000s, or adult education researchers in the 1970s, or by reformers like John Dewey in the early 20th century. These pedagogies are as old as Western civilization itself (older, in fact, but that is an argument for another project). Following this historical survey, contemporary SDL research and design was presented to show that there are multitudes of learning communities re-thinking what is meant by *school*, *teaching*, and *learning*. The goal of that survey was to provide detail on what SDL pedagogies look and feel like when they are enacted. Now that all of this information has been presented, it is time to turn to perhaps the greatest research question of all: *so what?*

Why does any of this history, education philosophy, and survey of experimental learning design matter? The argument of this dissertation is that the *why* and *how* of education directly

lead to the *why* and *how* of society itself (and vice versa). Put another way, a society designs its schools to *reproduce* itself. This is not a new idea. Bourdieu (1973) put forward this theory of social reproduction a half-century ago, and the historical survey presented in Chapter Two of this dissertation showcased similar views on education as far back as Aristotle. Education has often been theorized as a way to begin to cultivate today the world we hope to inherit in the future.

In that way, one could survey the current state of society and backwards map the education philosophies that created such a society. What has been the result of schools designed with accountability and compliance as their aims within the last generation (roughly 30 years)? Are people flourishing on an individual level? Well, the 2021 World Happiness Index ranked the U.S. number 19 in terms of "happiest" citizens, coming in behind the Czech Republic (Helliwell, Huang, Wang, & Norton, 2021). Also, the wealth gap between the richest and poorest Americans has doubled since 2000 and has grown more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic (Horowitz, Igielnik, & Kochhar, 2020). Education is not serving as "the great equalizer," as Horace Mann envisioned (Mann, 1891, pp. 59-60). In metrics of financial security and perceived happiness, it seems there is much lacking in our society in terms of individual flourishing.

What about democratic engagement? The eras of the Trump and Biden Administrations have been rife with political tensions. The events of January 6th, 2021 — when thousands of people violently descended on the U.S. Capitol building to disrupt the certification of the 2020 presidential election — in and of itself showcases that education is not adequately preparing citizens for participation in democracy. What is more, this event is being positioned by some on the fringes of the political Right as just, noble, and warranted, while at the same time conservative powers in state legislatures and school boards are restricting discourse in schools on race and equity. The U.S. education system is not bolstering democratic engagement or

cultivating the abilities of students to learn to live together, including the ability to strongly yet civilly disagree. The point is simple: schools in the United States are not leading to individual flourishing or societal betterment.

One could easily blame the system of education for the state of inequality and lack of civic engagement in society today. That, however, would be disingenuous. Schools are working in the way they were designed to work (Kozol, 1975). They are producing the society they were intended to produce. If a new society is desired, then a new vison of education is required. This chapter will build out this vision, acknowledging all of the thinkers and writers who have put forth arguments for similar visions throughout history (Chapter Two) and all of the school designers seeking to enact similar visions in their communities (Chapter Three). The claim of this chapter is that there is a vision of education (practical, not just theoretical) that can indeed lead to both individual and social flourishing.

The Constraints

This chapter will revisit some key people and arguments made so far in this dissertation, as well as bring in some new voices and data points. However, this chapter does not claim to encompass all of the arguments and writings about the individual and democratic aims of education. Rather, this chapter (more so than the previous ones) presents my own arguments for self-directed learning. This chapter is an elucidation of my own education philosophy, a particular take on SDL that brings together various elements presented in the dissertation so far.

The Structure

To articulate this vision, this chapter is divided into three main sections. The first explores the individual nature of learning, which sees education in the light of Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia. The second section turns the focus to education's role in social welfare.

The final section of this chapter brings the two together, outlining how education can cultivate both individual flourishing and societal well-being without sacrificing one for the other.

It should be noted that — as a philosophical dissertation — the chapters of this study build upon each other to forward a central claim. Therefore, the arguments presented in this chapter assume familiarity with the arguments and evidence from previous chapters. That being said, there still will be some repetition of previous points. This is not intended to be redundant, but rather some of the arguments presented in this chapter are so entwined with previous points that it necessitates restating prior argumentation.

Learning as a Pursuit of Happiness — Education for Individual Flourishing

William James (1929) wrote: "If we were to ask the question: 'What is human life's chief concern?' one of the answers we should receive is: 'It's happiness'" (p. 77). Jefferson (U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776) envisioned in the Declaration of Independence that all humans possess the "unalienable rights" of "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Freedom itself and freedom to pursue happiness have always been mythologized as an American birthright. But what is happiness, and what does it mean to pursue it? John Stuart Mill (1859/1993) wrote that "by happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain" (p. 144). Writ large, this is the basis of Mill's philosophy of utilitarianism, which advocated for the greatest good being the maximum pleasure/minimum pain for the greatest number of people. This is a philosophical view of happiness in terms of society at large (and there are indeed other philosophical, psychological, and theological definitions of happiness that could be explored), but what does this mean when thinking about cultivating happiness in people on an individual level? For the purposes of this dissertation, happiness will be presented as the Aristotelian idea of eudaimonia.

What does Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia — which is translated often either as *happiness* or *flourishing* – really mean? Tabensky (2016) defines *eudaimonia* as "a life of an individual with practical wisdom (*phronesis*) living in a good (*eudaimon*) community" (p. 11). Tabensky argued that there are three common definitions of happiness. The first is a state of mind, seen as a *cheerfulness*, or in some way in opposition of *sadness*. The second category of happiness is circumstantial: health, wealth, and the like. Tabensky writes that both of these ideas of happiness fall short of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*. He argues that it is better thought of as "the kind of happiness we attribute to a life, which, taken as a while, is a *good* one" (p. 11, italics in original). Eudaimonia is more than happiness as a feeling, emotion, or convergence of fortunate circumstances, instead having ethical dimensions (what makes a *good* life?). The following factors are necessary in cultivating eudaimonia: freedom for an individual to make meaning choices in their life, the intentional development of internal virtue, and the skills necessary to obtain external goods.

First, an individual must be free to choose. Theorists like Rousseau, Holt, and Illich placed free choice at the center of their education philosophies. Any form of compulsory education — no matter how open and interesting the curriculum and environment — could not lead to individual flourishing precisely because it was forced. One cannot be forced to flourish; one chooses it for themselves. This brings the various strands of SDL pedagogies explored so far into conflict. Is it possible, as Dewey, Montessori, Neill, Greenberg, and the free school movement believed, to create schools that fostered freedom? Or is the only moral choice to unschool, as Illich and Holt argued? This disagreement seems to be an impasse. However, this sort of binary logic — there are only two options to choose between! — lacks imagination and often reduces a world of possible solutions into two opposing camps. To attempt to break the

gridlock on this question of school or unschool, it will be helpful to highlight the second factor in cultivating eudaimonia: internal virtues.

The second factor in cultivating eudaimonia is the focus on virtue. To understand how Aristotle understands virtue within his idea of eudaimonia (again, which is often translated as *happiness* or *flourishing*), it will be helpful to circle back to Tabensky's (2016) definition of eudaimonia as the happiness that accompanies a good life (p. 11). Eudaimonia, Allen (2014) argued, is "the effort of individuals to achieve their full human flourishing by means of the development of their internal capacities" (p. 13). One learns to flourish through building internal virtues; one cannot achieve eudaimonia apart from virtue. Aristotle (2012) wrote, "He [sic] is happy who in accordance with his [sic] own complete virtue is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period, but throughout a complete life" (p. 17). For Aristotle, the happy life could only be achieved through cultivating internal virtues and external goods. Virtue here signifies character, or the traits developed through the practice of wisdom. A virtuous person has developed the capacity to make wise choices in the face of difficult decisions. Sometimes this means choosing against pleasure — delaying gratification — which separates eudaimonia from hedonic views of happiness that prioritize pleasure above all else.

This leads to the third factor in cultivating eudaimonia: the skills necessary to obtain external goods. By "external goods," Aristotle meant basic security. A happy person has had their needs met — financially, psychologically, and emotionally. There are elements of external goods that fall within a person's control (developing fiscal responsibility, making healthy choices in exercise and diet, choosing supportive friends and fulfilling work, etc.), but these things (health, wealth, and relationships) are also circumstantial, outside of anyone's complete control. Aristotle notes this — that eudaimonia is not just for a "chance period" — and is instead

a way of being throughout a person's "complete life." Eudaimonia is a long-term goal, a target to move closer to throughout the course of one's life. Aristotle does not address the inherent inequities present in this claim (some people start off with more external goods than others). In the absence of external goods, Aristotle would encourage a person truly seeking eudaimonia to focus on the first two factors: develop the capacity to choose for oneself and continually build within oneself wisdom and virtue to direct one's choices and external goods will surely follow.

There is a lot of discussion in *Nicomachean Ethics* about the idea of aims and ends and to explore these ideas is outside of the purvey of this dissertation. For now, the question at hand is: *How can education be eudemonic*, as in, how can education enable the young of society to live wise, thoughtful, and good lives? If that is really the question to answer, then the debate about school versus unschool (or homeschool) fades away. That is not to minimize the arguments made by either camp, but rather to point to the fact that eudaimonia can be achieved through a range of educational approaches (with various environments, curricula, and pedagogies). Eudaimonia is a combination of internal virtues and external goods within a community. There is a wide array of possibilities to cultivate these qualities in the next generation. There are factors, like home life and personal experiences, that are influential in shaping a person's notion of virtues and character that exist outside of any type of structured education. Other influencing factors, though, fall within the bounds of education — what Dewey saw as society's need to remake itself by passing on its values to the next generation and leaving them well equipped for the work of democracy. This education can happen within the physical boundaries of school, at home, in virtual spaces, or somewhere else.

Just as both *school* and *unschool* pedagogies can cultivate eudaimonia, they can likewise hinder its development. An unschooling approach that leaves a child to their own resources could

very well halt their development of character and leave them ignorant of cultural and social contexts needed for integration into society. Tara Westover's (2018) bestselling memoir *Educated* chronicled her upbringing by parents who were religious extremists. Her childhood was spent helping her father work in a junkyard and assisting her mother with midwifery. She taught herself to read and write and did not learn higher math until her late teens, when she was preparing to take the SAT to go to college. It was not until she stepped into history class at Brigham Young University that she encountered concepts like slavery and the Holocaust. Westover chronicled her experience as an argument against the deschooling approach of her parents, believing that it left her unready to be a productive member of society. At the same time, the skills of self-directedness that she learned through her education allowed her to quickly teach herself important cultural, historical, and social knowledge. So, her tale is both cautionary and exemplary.

Again, this is not an argument against deschooling altogether, as there have been a number of arguments presented throughout this dissertation about the shortcomings of *school* — traditional and progressive models alike. Rather, the point that I am making is that it is not really about the *how* of school, but about the *why*. Why do we send our children to schools or decide to keep them home? What are we trying to accomplish through their education? If it is flourishing — as in Aristotle's eudaimonia — then intentionality is required in assisting children to grow in the development of inner virtues and external goods. That is not to say that these things are to be forced upon children through packaged curriculum and assessments. Rather, educators (be they parents, teachers, or guides) need to attend to the environment and learning experiences that will allow children to freely cultivate inner character traits and external skills that will further empower them to choose the life they want to live *for themselves* (see Chapter Three). Raab

(2017) argued that "the life well-lived thus requires individuals be prepared to make choices…that will make the experience of their lives good and pleasant — i.e., such that they can experience the subjective forms of well-being" (pp. 129-130). So, cultivating eudaimonia looks like allowing children *freedom to make choices* in the present, so as to further develop their *freedom to choose* in the future.

Learning to Live Together: SDL and Social Responsibility

After outlining the idea of eudaimonia, Aristotle (2009) raises the point: "It is said that those who are supremely happy and self-sufficient have no need of friends" (p. 176). What follows in Book IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a survey of the values of sharing life with other people. Aristotle concludes: "The presence of friends, then, seems desirable in all circumstances" (p. 180). The good life, for Aristotle, means being in a good community. Remember, eudaimonia for Aristotle was *wisdom* as flourishing within good community. In fact, wisdom was impossible to attain outside of community, on one's own. Wisdom meant living in such a way that not only bettered one's life, but actually bettered society as well. This idea needs to be explored a little further before the argument progresses.

Steel (2014) made the argument that the shift in education discourse over the centuries from cultivating *wisdom* in students to cultivating *intelligence* has led to a decline in seeing education in terms of the public good. Intelligence is something that can be codified and comparatively assessed between individuals (even if the codification and assessment are arbitrarily designed). As such, intelligence is an individual attribute in service of the individual alone. Not so with wisdom. Intelligence, and the obsession with quantifying student knowledge via testing, have driven education discourse in recent memory. How often have politicians or school leaders (or parents, for that matter) advocated for reforming schools to cultivate wiser

students? Sternberg (2007) wrote: “Wisdom is neither taught in schools, nor is it generally discussed…[many people] will not see the value of teaching something that shows no promise of raising conventional test scores” (p. 156).

That is not to say, as Sternberg argues, that wisdom is indeed teachable. Philosophers have been wrestling with that notion since Socrates. This is not a call to replace Algebra with Wisdom 101, as though it could be easily transmitted from teacher to student. Instead, *wisdom* should be of concern of educators, it should be part and parcel of what it means to be *educated*. This argument circles back to Tabensky’s (2016) elucidation of the eudemonic life as a wise individual within a good community (p. 11). Tabesnky argued that *community,* in fact, was necessary to develop a rational mind:

> Our existence as fully thinking creatures is a function of living with others in a community that fosters the conditions for the expression of unique modes of grasping the world. We ought to understand our lives as ideally embedded within what could be characterized as a regime of difference — a matrix of contrasting relationships aimed at a domain within which we all dwell. (p. 141)

Again, the point here is not lean too heavily into philosophizing, but rather to ground the idea of community into the foundations of *knowing* in the first place. People know things contextually, within relationships (this goes back to the social constructivism explored in Chapter One). This is not to promote a radical sort of relativity (as in, each person creates their own reality and truth), but rather to identify that people make meaning together, experientially, through their own shared explorations of a world that they hold in common.

The larger point being made is that wisdom and virtue themselves are pluralistic. They develop within community practice. One community may have a different view of a wise and

virtuous person than another. To attempt to create criteria around wisdom or a set list of virtues leads to a sort of cultural supremacy and inevitably will lead to one culture trying to impose their virtues on another. This has fueled many colonizing projects, as well as pitted various communities against each other throughout human history. So, education that fosters wisdom and virtue must first engage the larger community in explicating just what these values mean within our current society. But how is this done?

To understand a little more fully what it means for education to exist for societal well-being and democratic engagement, it is helpful to return to John Dewey (1916/1944), whose *Democracy and Education* considers the topic quite deeply. Dewey was cognizant that different communities would have different value sets and ways of life in which to socialize initiates. Not all of these communities had the same "worth" in terms of having their values reflected in larger society (he used the example of gangs) (pp. 84-85). So, Dewey proposed a process in evaluating the worth of a community's value set. The goal was to "extract the desirable traits of forms of community life that actually exist, and employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement" (p. 85). He proposed two metrics for measuring the worth of a community's value:

1. "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared?" (p. 85). This question means, how many kinds of different interests and values does the group share in common?
2. "How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?" (p. 85). This question means, how free are members of this community to interact with and share life with members of other communities?

For Dewey, the first metric measured the ability of a diverse group to find common ground. It is not enough just to have things in common, but to have varied interests, meaning that different members within the community are sharing their own unique perspectives that then distillate throughout the group. Success on this metric looks like having a large, diverse community in which all members share a large number of interests. The second metric evaluates a community's ability to interact with other communities that have different value sets. How "full and free" are community members able to learn from and interact with other communities that may not share their values? Success here looks like a free exchange of ideas between communities. By asking these two questions, Dewey is arguing, we can evaluate a community's value set and its contribution to larger society. "An undesirable society," Dewey argued, "is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience" (p. 99).

> Another problem issued by Dewey was the short-sightedness of education:
>
> Each generation is inclined to educate its young so as to get along in the present world instead of with a view to the proper end of education: the promotion of the best possible realization of humanity as humanity. (p. 95)

A result of this inclination to see education as a way to help children "get along" in today's world is the knee-jerk reaction of educators toward trends and fads. Terms like "21st century skills" and "innovative technology" are just the latest iterations of this in education discourse, which highlights the hold that market forces (that see schooling merely in terms of supplying labor to industry) have on education. Much of SDL discourse falls into the same trap (as has been shown). SDL is often presented as an innovative way for learners to adapt to an ever-changing landscape, stay technologically savvy, and learn the skills that will ensure their marketability to employers. For Dewey, that is missing the mark by a long shot.

What does it mean for education to promote the "best possible realization of humanity as humanity?" Well, Dewey does not really give a concrete answer, as that would really defeat the point. The goal is not to start with some distant, idealized vision of humanity that is then imposed down on children through schooling. That kind of thinking was precisely the problem for Dewey. Rather, Dewey was arguing for a "ground up" approach. Everyone exists as members of communities with varying value sets. What is called for is a sort of cross-pollination, where a community's values adapt and change as more members join. For Dewey, this cross-pollination was the democratic principle. Human societies work together to explicate their values, and then, through free and fair exchange and debate, they adapt various values and ideologies into commonality. That is not to say that society members hold all things in common all the time, but rather to say that society as a whole is freely, fairly, and equally reflective of its members. This kind of society "makes provision for participation in its good of all of its members on equal terms" and ensures "flexible readjustment of its institutions through the interaction of the different forms of associated life" (p. 99). Meaning, a truly democratic society is always evolving in its ideals of the best realization of humanity as humanity.

This is why education cannot just be for oneself and one's own happiness. Education has a role to play — the largest role to play — in maintaining a democracy that is ever-evaluating its ideals and adjusting accordingly. This vision of education starts local, within the values and worldviews of particular communities. But it grows, through the free and fair exchange of ideas. This vision of education has little room for things which are externally imposed by distant policymakers. To achieve eudaimonia on a societal level means that education cannot just be concerned with individual flourishing — flourishing must extend to all members, on equal terms. As long as there exists inequality in the manner in which all members of society are enjoying the

"good" of society, then work remains to be done, and a great deal of the work is done through education. That is why for Dewey there is little use in short-sighted views of education. Education is at the same time immediate to the present learner but also has its target on the ultimate goal: the best realization of humanity. We are not there yet, and so we must press on in our work of education and democracy.

Bringing it Together: Learning For the Self and the Other

SDL researchers have long sought to separate the phrase *self-directed* from a view of education that is only focused on the individual. Candy (1991) argued, "The term self-direction has misled many into elevating the individual above the collective, whereas the nature of knowledge and nature of learning inherently places learners into relationship with others" (p. 311). Brookefield (1985) wrote that, "On reflection . . . it is evident that no act of learning can be self directed if we understand self direction as meaning the absence of external sources of assistance" (p. 7). Gergen (1997) argued that "our capacity to mean (to think, to be intelligible, to count ourselves as individual agents at all) is born of relationship. Relationship precedes individual existence, and not vice versa" (p. 17). Peters and Gray (2005) argued that SDL is a paradox, as "the literature of SDL and the literature of social constructionism show that hardly anyone learns alone" (p. 12). Johann Pestalozzi (1828) wrote nearly two centuries ago that individual flourishing and societal betterment were bound together: "In relation to *society*, man [sic] should be qualified by education, *to be a useful member of it*. In order to be truly *useful* it is necessary that he should be truly *independent*" (p. 25, italics in original). It has already been shown in this chapter that education as eudemonic must cultivate both flourishing individuals and a flourishing society. Now, it is time to bring these ideas together to reflect on how this type of education philosophy can be enacted.

How can a learning environment foster eudemonic development? Raab (2017), in her dissertation work at Stanford University on the topic of school design for individual flourishing and democratic engagement, identified five key elements: safety, slack, connectedness, autonomy support, and democratic voice. These elements will be briefly outlined here as they are a good starting point in bringing together a vision of education that seeks to cultivate both flourishing people and a flourishing society. An important note about language: when I say *school* in the following section, I am broadly referring to any learning environment (home included). So, these are design principles that can be made on a micro-level (a parent homeschooling their children), or macro-level (district level school design).

For Raab, safety is the foundational design principle. Safety here is pretty encompassing. Raab is not just referring to a physical sense of safety, though that is indeed important. Emotional and psychological safety are necessary as well. Raab argued that "there are both objective and subjective components: it must actually be safe and feel safe" (p. 160). So, this is not a discussion on fortifying schools against instances of violence. Instead, it is an acknowledgement that people cannot flourish where they feel threatened. So, a tension must be held. On the one hand, there needs to be agreed upon rules of engagement. Raab wrote that in the absence of agreed upon rules, norms, and consequences, "beyond feeling unsafe, students cannot develop a sense of competence in navigating their world and don't have the opportunity to internalize social norms. This affects their sense of competence, their ability to interact and connect with others in healthy ways" (p. 160). On the other hand, too rigid of an environment oppresses a learner's autonomy, creating an environment where learners either merely comply with or look for ways to rebel against authority. The path to eudaimonia exists within that tension — holding clear lines that not only ensure a learner's actual safety, but also cultivate

within the individual a feeling of safety and the knowledge that they have agency to influence their environment, not just comply with it. Safety is key for both individual flourishing and societal well-being.

Raab's second design principle is the concept of slack, or the opposite of scarcity. What Raab is getting at is the idea that education reform efforts tend to impose *more* on teachers and learners, not *less*. Schedules become even more tightly packed, curriculum even more dense, and standards more numerous. Slack is the idea that spaces need to be opened up in schools and schedules — for planning, for reflection, for authentic work, for questions and inquires, for experimentation, for trial and error — so that learning can actually occur. Schools continue to increase the workload of teachers and students, while piling on tasks that have little to do with cultivating individual or societal flourishing. Steel (2014) argued that the idea of slack, of extra time for contemplation of inquiry, was a perceived threat to educators:

> As teachers, it seems that that one of our prime concerns is always to keep our students busy and active rather than contemplative; they cannot be given any time in which they have nothing to do, because they will not know what to do with it; they "won't be learning"; they will "waste time," or most annoyingly, they will become disruptive. (p. 60)

Students are kept busy, often with meaningless work, because the assumption in traditional education is that they cannot be trusted with their own time. The solution here is not a simple one. This type of slack will not be achieved by just throwing more study hall-type blocks of time into the schedule. Rather, this slack needs to be intentionally woven into the rhythms of educators and learners alike. These are times that invite contemplation, reflection, and thoughtfulness and can be about specific academics or more broadly connected to a learner's

home life. Building space into schedules and routines recognizes that children are human beings and that time is necessary for meaning making to happen. Otherwise, school is reduced to the efficiency logic of factories, where students are pushed through curriculum, sticking to a pacing guide becomes the mark of good teaching, and individual curiosity is seen as a disruption to redirect rather than an inquiry to follow.

Raab's third design principle is connectedness. Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia necessitated community participation. Raab argued that is fundamental for teachers and learners "to know one another as whole human beings and to react to, and interact with, one another in intentional ways" (p. 162). This element can easily be taken for granted as naturally occurring in schools. Of course, students cultivate their own friend groups and social circles. Connectedness as a design principle, though, is intentionally set against a view of schooling that only serves individual aims (like test scores and grades). To truly attend to the eudemonic nature of education means cultivating learning environments in which learners have to consider their peers as fellow humans and interact with them accordingly. In practical terms, the graduation requirements for most schools set certain benchmarks around academic courses that must be completed. Few, however, require students to demonstrate that they have developed the sort of skills and character traits to positively impact others in the community. Some SDL spaces (like Summerhill and Sudbury Valley Schools outlined in Chapter Two) require learners to stand before the community and make the case that they are ready to go into society and positively contribute to the greater good. To design for *connectedness*, then, means intentionally creating an environment and learning experiences where learners have to interact with each other, so that they can practice collaboration, disagreement, and the skills needed to live in a community of others.

The fourth design principle from Raab's research is autonomy support — creating environments that foster the self-directedness of the educator and the learner. This dissertation has explored the spectrum of autonomy in SDL spaces. This study is not going to take a firm point of view on *how much freedom* is enough for truly eudemonic education. Some schools and learners may gravitate toward a sort of absolute freedom, in which very few if any boundaries are placed upon learners (a Rousseau-like approach). Others may have very firm boundaries and guardrails, with a range of choices offered. What is important is that this design principle of autonomy does not interfere with or impede the other design principles presented in this section. So, if a learner's freedom is violating the principle of safety, for instance, or impeding the principle of connectedness to the wider community, then that is a signal that the freedom of one or more learners is inhibiting the eudemonic education of the community as a whole. There is a wide world of possibilities in how schools can cultivate learner autonomy, as previous chapters in this dissertation showcase.

The final design principle for Raab is democratic voice. It seems fitting here to offer an extensive quote from her describing this principle:

> School is a microcosm of the larger society and is the place where students (and educators) learn how to interact with one another and as a group. How this happens in school affects how students will think about their rights and responsibilities in society as adults. For this to be effective, educators and students should have a meaningful role in all aspects of how the school is run — the governance, rule development, discipline, and maintenance. It also has implications for pedagogy in that students need spaces that support autonomy, connection, and the additional aim of democratic responsibility. (p. 164)

An eudemonic education, then, necessitates that learners are growing in their ability to meaningfully engage in democracy. Schools that are geared toward compliance and accountability have little use in authentically engaging the democratic voice of educators and learners alike.

These principles — safety, slack, connectedness, autonomous support, and democratic voice — then lay the foundation for understanding education in eudemonic terms. They are necessary (meaning they must *all* be present), but they alone are not sufficient. Layered on top of this foundation are the actual mechanisms and content of education. To revisit Aristotle: eudaimonia consists of internal virtues and external goods. Education must assist learners in cultivating internal character as well as the skills and abilities to wisely choose their own life paths. This approach to education will require a re-thinking of the role of the environment, the role of experiences, and the role of the educator — all of the things that were outlined in Chapter Three of this dissertation. Specifically, I argue, the following elements are required for a truly eudemonic education:

- *Character*: Eudaimonia requires the cultivating of internal virtues. This is not something that "just happens," but rather requires intentional input from parents, educators, and society at large. At question here is "*What kind of human beings do we want our education system to produce?"* I hesitate here, as the danger is high that the idea of character education gets subsumed into the other forms of indoctrination already occurring in schools. I am not advocating for a specific set of virtues, or the privileging of some virtues over others (as already argued, these are pluralistic and emergent from various communities), nor am I calling for more standardization, curriculum, and assessment around character (though an implication for future research will have to

address how character education shows up in school design and how learners showcase growth in such character traits). Rather, at this point, I am calling for an interrogation of school design with the aim of understanding what sort of virtues schools are currently intentionally cultivating in the youth of today. If education is to be eudemonic, then it must explicitly voice what sorts of internal virtues we hope to see cultivated in our children.

- *Equity:* As shown in Chapter Three, it is possible for SDL environments to reproduce the same inequalities present in traditional schools. It was also shown that empowering learners with the agency to direct their own education mitigates against teacher and administrative bias. Eudemonic education requires a commitment to equity, and this commitment requires intentional action on the part of learning designers. The presence of Raab's design principles — safety, slack, connection, autonomy support, and democratic voice — lay the foundation for equitable environments, but educators must also intentionally build liberating structures — systems and processes that ensure all voices are not only heard, but also have real power — into learning design.
- *Relevancy:* An education that is only concerned with the future will not develop eudaimonia in the present. For learners to truly flourish and find happiness in their learning, their education must be relevant to their current needs. Educators must allow for the interruption of a learner's natural curiosity, as well as design learning experiences that invite learners to engage with real, pressing problems.

Redefining Self-Directed Learning

With those design principles in mind — safety, slack, connectedness, autonomous support, democratic voice, character, equity, and relevancy — it is time to return to the idea of

self-directed learning itself. As already explored, Malcolm Knowles (1975) offered the most widely accepted definition:

> 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. (p. 18)

In a move to update the definition, the International Society of Self-Directed Learning (2020) adopted the following definition at their 2020 symposium: "self-directed learning is an intentional learning process that is created and evaluated by the learner." The goal of this revised definition was to be intentionally broad, allowing the wide spectrum of the SDL community to at least share this simple starting point: the learning belongs to the learner. The Institute for Self-Directed Learning created their own definition of SDL because they felt that current definitions failed to address the communal aspects of learning as well as the *why* of SDL. Their definition:

> Self-directed learning is when learners — in the context of an interdependent community of peers, trained educators, and caring adults — choose the process, content, skills, learning pathways, and outcomes of learning, with the guidance, accountability, and support of others, in service of finding a calling that will change their communities and the world. (Kenner et al., 2020, p. 23)

As helpful as these definitions may be in defining and refining the idea of SDL, they do not quite encapsulate the ideas that have been presented in this and previous chapters. So, I propose a slightly more nuanced definition.

As I have conducted this research, I have been wrestling with the phrase self-directed learning. I honestly believed that by this point in the study that I would do away with the phrase

altogether and coin something that was perhaps a little more authentic to the vast and varied views of education philosophers presented in Chapter Two (I dare say, John Dewey would not be supportive of the term self-directed learning). However, I come short of fully creating a new term for a couple of reasons. First, there are already way too many labels for this type of learning (learner led education, learner centered education, unschooling, etc.). Yet another phrase would just continue to cause confusions. The second reason why I choose to keep *self-directed learning* is because it holds to the heart of this education philosophy all the way back to Aristotle's *Metaphysics.* Humans are naturally curious beings who want to make sense of their world. The learning starts with the individual and moves outward.

SDL as a label has limitations for a number of reasons. First, it conveys that learning can happen solely on one's own, which is false. Learning always happens in relationships (even if those relationships are mediated by objects, like books or other technology). Second, it privileges the individual over society. Learning is for oneself and is positioned as agnostic toward the needs of the community. Third, learning is a neutral concept. One could learn how to be a concert pianist or master thief. The term *learning* is void of any sort of ethical value. So, for those reasons — that SDL posits that learning can happen independently, privileges the individual while ignoring society, and is void of ethical value — I have decided that the best way to truly clarify my position on this topic is to fuse two terms that have received extended attention throughout this dissertation together: *eudemonia* and *self-directed learning*. I call it Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning (ESDL).

Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning

Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning, then, in simple terms *is the process in which human beings, growing in internal virtues, external skills and abilities, knowledge, and wisdom within a*

community, freely choose a life that leads to their own happiness and collectively participate in creating a society in which all can flourish. There are terms within this definition that need to be explicated further.

First, it was important to include the full idea of eudaimonia: internal virtues and external goods, here represented by "skills and abilities," but also "within a community." External goods consist of friendships and supportive social networks and internal virtues emerge from community values. It was important to me to have *wisdom* in the definition so that it is clear that this type of education is not just about content knowledge or intelligence, but about cultivating wisdom and contemplation. Also, the "knowledge," "skills," and "abilities" here are not pre-defined. Each learning community can make their own determinations as to the content of education. The "within a community" piece of the definition is as close as I come to referring to school or teachers. Community here is broad and could apply to homeschool and unschool communities as well. It is implied that some sort of educator is involved, as humans tend not to cultivate the things listed in the definition without the intentional, caring guidance of someone else. "Are given responsibility to freely choose" is all that I say about the *self-directed* piece of the definition. This is intentionally broad. For Knowles, SDL had to consist of the learner controlling all aspects of the learning project. He, however, was working within adult education. In working with children, this will look different. I argue, though, that choice, agency, and responsibility have to be moved to the learner at a young age, even if it is a gradual process. In order to be agentic beings that are free to choose flourishing lives and fully participate in democracy, children have to have real experience with agentic action in their education. Lastly, the definition brings together the two main ideas that were focused on in this chapter: education for individual flourishing and societal well-being. Dewey was quoted at the beginning of this

chapter as saying that “the problem of achieving both of these values without the sacrifice of either is likely to be the dominant problem of civilization for many years to come” (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936, p. xv). School has to be for the individual and for society, so both are present in my definition.

ESDL has been defined, but what does it look like in practice? This dissertation has presented a wide range of learning environments that fall within the spectrum of self-directed learning. This chapter, specifically, has explored what is entailed by a eudemonic education. What, though, comprises a Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning environment? Here I identify and describe three principles of ESDL: 1) intentional focus on virtue and character, 2) individual choice, agency, and responsibility, and 3) learning within community to develop authentic democratic engagement. These three principles will be explored further as to how they could be implemented in learning environments.

Virtue and Character

ESDL spaces are intentionally structured to cultivate virtue and character. This is in direct contrast to schools that take an agnostic approach to the character of their students, choosing instead to focus solely on standardized test scores in arbitrarily chosen disciplines. Again, this dissertation is not going to take a firm stand on defining and distilling these virtues and character traits. Rather, these virtues “bubble up” from various communities and through the free and fair inter-community exchange of ideas become adopted by wider society. John Dewey (1916/1944) put forward a similar argument over a century ago. He argued that education had a larger role to play in society than just preparing the next workforce — it had the obligation of cultivating good humans. To repeat a quote from earlier in this chapter:

> Each generation is inclined to educate its young so as to get along in the present world instead of with a view to the proper end of education: the promotion of the best possible realization of humanity as humanity. (p. 95)

The role of schools is to create a good society through creating good people.

But how? Part of the reason schools default to standardized tests is that it becomes a fairly easy way to assess whether a student has memorized the right mathematical formula or historical fact. Virtue, though, is not tied to regurgitating information. There is a knowledge component, an ability to know and name that which is virtuous; but then one must act upon this knowledge. One displays virtue through virtuosity. How do schools teach and assess for virtue?

A school I work with does it this way: they list out what they refer to as their "profile of a graduate," or the skills, fields of knowledge, and character traits a student must master in order to graduate. On this list are traditional disciplines — math, history, science, and communication. Also listed are identified character traits like *empathy* and *trust* as well as co-working skills like *collaboration*. In order to graduate from this school, a learner must submit proof — from any season of their lives — that they have mastered these traits. They submit these proofs in live practicals, not dissimilar from how firefighters prove to their peers and leaders that they can do the job by showing mastery via a live demonstration of skills. Those grading these practicals (including educators, experts in these various fields, and peers) give one of two judgements: either the learner has shown mastery of the skill or character trait, or they are told "not yet," and must continue to work.

Elsewhere in this dissertation, other models were presented. Schools like Summerhill and Sudbury Valley asked their potential graduates to present to the community their arguments for why a degree should be conferred upon them. In doing so, they had to show that they were ready

to enter out into the world to be productive members of society. These presentations did not have to directly address virtue and character, but they are examples nonetheless of how virtue can show up in school assessment. Again, the goal here is not to be prescriptive, but rather to show that it is possible for virtue and character education to show up in education design. ESDL calls for intentionally focusing on character development so that eudaimonia, the flourishing that comes along with a life well lived, can be cultivated in the next generation.

Character education is nothing new. As shown in Chapter Two, the earliest schools in the U.S. were religious schools and had as their aim the passing along of Christian worldviews and virtues. Today, there are still of a variety of different religious and secular schools that put virtue and character education at the core of their curriculum. ESDL is different, though, than these already established school in that the focus on virtue and character is just one component of school design. ESDL must also cultivate the freedom to choose and build the skills of democracy.

Individual Choice, Agency, and Responsibility

A centerpiece of self-directed learning philosophies as presented in this dissertation has been the freedom of the individual to choose. This was showcased in the natural philosophy of Rousseau and the writings of John Holt and Ivan Illich in the mid-20th century. This focus on agency and choice has also been central to the SDL literature of the last half century that grew out of adult education research in the 1970s. An integral part of being human is the ability to make choices — to choose for oneself. Schools designed with free choice in mind contrasts greatly with schools designed to impose compliance and accountability. Schools that cultivate and embrace freedom start with the individual learner, holding to Aristotle's argument that all people are naturally curious and seek knowledge. No one has to be forced to learn.

There are a variety of ways that choice, agency, and responsibility can be woven into school design (as glimpsed in the pages of this dissertation). A.S. Neill's school at Summerhill fully embraced individual choice and did not impose any requirements on students. Children could choose to attend classes that aligned with their interests. An SDL school that I work with infuses freedom into the learning design in multiple ways: learners are responsible for making (and enforcing) the rules, blocks of time exists in the schedule for learners to freely choose what they will work on, how they will work on it, and for how long, and learners (along with their families) customize their own badge plan, the collection of skills, knowledge, and abilities they must master in order to graduate. Again, the goal here is not to be prescriptive but rather to highlight the fact that individual choice, agency, and responsibility can exists within education via a multitude of options. For a space to cultivate Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning, however, the freedom of the individual must be placed at the center.

Freedom alone, though, will not cultivate ESDL. The goal of this education is not just to foster agentic, responsible humans, but also to give people opportunities to grow in wisdom and virtue so that in embracing their freedom to choose they are growing in their ability to choose wisely. Even freedom combined with a focus on character and virtue, though, will not fully embody the vision of ESDL — flourishing individuals creating a flourishing society, the "best possible realization of humanity as humanity," as Dewey (1916/1944) argued (p. 95). Another integral component of ESDL is required: learning within a community to develop authentic engagement with democratic governance.

Democratic Community

As has been argued in this chapter, education is not merely for oneself. Education exists for the whole of society. Traditional schools (public and private) tend to focus on metrics of

individual achievement: grades (and grade point averages), standardized test scores, individual degrees and certifications. ESDL, while still very much rooted in the individual (as glimpsed in the previous section), also has a learning community embedded in its design. ESDL has as its aim societal flourishing, which means that a person cannot merely be satisfied with their own growth and development; they must also consider the growth and development of the *other* (peers, teachers, parents, etc.).

This has been a variable in the history of SDL as presented in Chapter Two. From some (like Rousseau), it was possible (even preferable) to learn on one's own. Others (like Dewey) stressed the societal (and democratic) importance of education. Much of the literature around SDL has focused on the individual benefits of this type of learning (Knowles, 1975; Guglielmino, 2008). The focus on community and democracy (as well as character and virtue) serves as a way to differentiate ESDL from other SDL-related schools and philosophies.

What might this community focus look like in school design? Examples are replete throughout this dissertation. A school I work with infuses community into every aspect of the learning design. The rules of the spaces are created by the learners themselves (which requires community input and compromise). Also, the learners are responsible for enforcing the rules (at this school, there is no such thing as a "principal's office" or "detention"). So, what does the community do when a peer breaks the agreed upon rules? That is for the community to determine (it should be noted that there are caring adults present in these conversations who, through Socratic questioning, probe the thinking and reflection of the learners). Beyond the tasks of governance and management, this school also leans heavily into collaboration. Many of the learning challenges are group projects and learners must learn to work together to solve a

relevant task.[32] Peers then give each other feedback on the collaboration process. Also, all work at this school is peer-approved, meaning that a person's fellow learners must sign off on the badges they earn for their badge plan.

There are a variety of ways in which learning can be rooted in the community. The free school movement of the 1960s and 1970s envisioned a disparate network of community schools practicing the hard work of democracy. Though the movement waned, there is still much to learn from these exemplars (and some, like Sudbury Valley, are still around). ESDL requires a focus on community, holding that eudaimonia means living a good life in good community. Schools may be fully community focused (where learners are given the responsibility to create the rules and govern the space) or this practice in community and democracy may exist on a more micro-level (group projects, goal setting partners). What should be true of an ESDL environment is that learners are not only getting regular practice at self-regulation and self-direction, but also in community debate, feedback, problem solving, and compromise.

Vision for Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning

So, the conclusion of this whole project is that there is a vision of education, stretching all the way back to Aristotle, with lots of variations and branches along the way, that has as its aim the flourishing individuals that together create a flourishing society. It is important, here at the end, to guard against some sort of idyllic utopianism. I am not saying that implementing my view of Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning will usher in a perfect society. I know from first-hand experience that this type of education is inherently messy and complex. Shifting agency and

[32] A recent example: the mayor recently approached the school with a problem. The town was wanting to develop a network of multi-use paths for biking, walking, and golfcarts. The problem is that the town is quite old and established, so creating a connected trail network would require building on property that has been previously developed and is privately owned. Learners worked in teams to develop a map and pitch. The best pitch (as judged by peers and experts) was invited to present to the town council.

responsibility to learners in order to guide and direct their own learning is anything but neat and easy. Allowing young people to authentically govern their own spaces and democratically engage with one another to solve community problems is rife with frustration, disagreements, and setbacks. No, the society created from this type of education will not be perfect, but it will be authentic. It will involve a more educated and engaged citizenry, it will be ripe with potential as the individuals who will be leading this society have had a lifetime to grow in a eudemonic, self-directed, democratically minded communities. If this education really is rooted in character formation, not compulsory individual competition, then society as a whole should follow in valuing, celebrating, and embodying these virtues as well. Also, as Dewey said, this is a problem for years to come. Such an education may have little short-term effects, but the long view is that generation by generation, we may more fully lean into such eudemonic values.

Remember, schools are not failing; they are, in fact, succeeding at just what they were designed to do. Jonathan Kozol (1975) wrote: "U.S. education is by no means an inept, disordered misconception. It is an ice-cold and superb machine. It does the job…for which it was originally conceived" (p. 1). Our education system, writ large, was designed to produce the society we have today. Alternative education models and reform efforts have been unable to make much difference in breaking or reprogramming that "superb machine." In fact, it is much more likely that such efforts (like the free school movement in the 1960s) get subsumed by the machinations of traditional schooling. The result is that schools may use more language like *child-centered*, *autonomous learning*, and *agency*, may throw a new coat of paint on the walls, and perhaps introduce new curriculum that is *cultural relevant* or fosters *critical thinking*. All of this though, as Kozol argued, "does not break the bars, but fashions them more strong while rendering them less visible" (p. 4). All of these efforts still serve a system built on accountability,

compliance, competition, and corporatization. No one at the district, state, or federal levels in education policy are seriously considering how to make schools places where children flourish, grow in wisdom, and develop the skills to critically engage in democracy. Instead, policy discourse is how to boost test scores, meet the needs of industry (like focus on STEM education), stay globally competitive, minimize behavior issues, introduce more corporate technology, and do so on lower budgets. Priorities like these are why we have the society we have. If we want a different society, then a new vision of education is required.

I argued in the last chapter that SDL micro-school networks, while they pose a threat to public education, are actually well-positioned to lead the charge on whole-model school transformation. The truth of the matter is that private options, especially as they become more numerous and affordable, are only going to grow in their influence. There are many within these networks that share Kirkpatrick's (2008) view that education is a private, not public, good. I think the impetus is on leaders in the field of SDL to articulate a vision of education that is eudemonic, that truly is invested in cultivating good humans and a good society. Micro-schools are able to serve as lab schools, quickly adapting and learning from trial and error in order to share their learning with the wider education community. It has already been shown pretty exhaustively that SDL environments have existed for centuries *and that they work!* This is not an innovative model nor an untested proposition. The question now is three-fold:

1. Will these school environments be market-driven centers of individual learning, or will they develop the capacities necessary for Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning to happen? *If SDL spaces remain disconnected from the public good, they will only sabotage democratic schooling and create further societal inequities and dysfunction.*

2. Will these school environments develop the capacity to create a body of research that they share with each other, with other educators, with universities and institutes of learning, and with education policymakers? *If SDL spaces are to become influential outside of their own spheres, then they must create partnerships with research institutes and policymakers in order to continue making the case for the large-scale adoption of SDL pedagogies.*
3. Will there be the political will in the public sector to learn from these spaces and to make necessary, concrete, and drastic changes to school design in order to cultivate individual flourishing and a vibrant democracy? *ESDL cannot be merely an "add on" to the current way of doing school. It will require a complete re-thinking of the "why" and "how" of school. There must be the political will to combat the interests and influence of those who profit from the current education model in order to make real changes to the way we do education.*

I do not know how these questions will play out in education discourse. I do not anticipate quick or easy change. In fact, I fully expect this to be a generations-long process (as it already has been). However, I am hopeful. I do think the concept of education in this country is at a crossroads. No one, from any political or ideological stripe, seems particularly happy or content with the state of education. There is growing support of school choice and an ever-increasing number of options for alternative schooling that are getting cheaper. Public schools are approaching an existential crisis, one that I do not think they can avoid. They have existed practically unchanged for the last century and a half. It seems, though, that the old Darwinian concept of *adapt or die* has finally caught up with public education. What will happen next?

I do not know, though examining the history of rich and vibrant education philosophies found in this dissertation has made me hopeful for the future. We do not need to innovate our way out of this present moment. Rather, we should learn from those who have gone before us, who have argued time and time again that humans are curious beings that want to understand and make meaning of the world, want to lead flourishing, happy, interesting lives, and want to be members of a collective that is solving problems, growing in knowledge, creating art, celebrating the good, and bringing up the next generation to make the world even better. A more robust vision of education — one that starts with the curiosity of the learner, then draws them forward into the world and into interaction with the community to learn and grow together as flourishing individuals and the best possible realization of humanity as humanity — has already been cast, time and time again. Perhaps it is time we listen and take action.

5 SUMMARIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation sought to uncover the historical and theoretical foundations of self-directed learning (SDL), document the variations among SDL theorists and practitioners, present arguments in favor of SDL approaches, highlight current research on SDL, and discuss in depth how SDL education philosophies differ from traditional approaches to learning. Those arguments have been presented at length. This chapter will summarize the major points of this study, provide an overview of potential avenues of further inquiry, and offer a brief reflection on what comes next.

The History of Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning has been shown to have a rich and varied history in the development of Western education philosophies and practices. Chapter Two of this dissertation summarized many of highlights and conflicts within this history. Aristotle and the argument that humankind by its very nature desires to learn was the starting point of this history. The history weaved through the rise of the sophists and professional teachers, the place of apprenticeships and vocational education, and the widespread adoption of the printing press. Rousseau argued for education by nature alone, positioning societal pressures and organized, compulsory learning as harmful to the natural development of the human mind. Rousseau's arguments greatly influenced Johann Pestalozzi, who believed firmly in education via experience. Pestalozzi put forward a view of education that was rooted in labor and experience: people learned by doing tasks and interacting with objects as they existed in the world. A student of Pestalozzi's, Friedrich Froebel, advanced Pestalozzi's education philosophy by focusing on play, or the active imaginations of children as they experienced the world. Froebel would pioneer the systematic use of

manipulatives in education and started the kindergarten movement that sought to offer structured education to young children.

Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel not only influenced European education philosophy, but also inspired American educators like Horace Mann and John Dewey. Mann and Dewey both viewed education as a common good and schooling as a way for younger generations to be equipped for democratic participation. Dewey and other progressive reformers like Maria Montessori put forward a vision of education in direct response to the industrialized model of education which viewed schools as factories that needed to be engineered for efficiency and students as products that needed to be mass produced. Dewey and Montessori — in an echo of Aristotle — argued for a vision of education that put the individual at the center.

The later decades of the 19th century and the era of Reconstruction of southern U.S. states after the Civil War led to a unique conversation about education and the Black community. On one end of the spectrum, Booker T. Washington argued for vocational education for young Black males. W.E.B. Du Bois represented a different view, arguing that education — specifically Africana education, which centered the histories, cultures, and circumstances of the Black community — was the way forward out oppression. Du Bois argued that this type of education was required in order for people who have had their histories, cultures, and senses of identity stripped away to achieve the self-realization and self-actualization needed to be agentic directors of their own education.

The rise of progressive educators in the 20th century was accompanied by experiments in school settings. Both Dewey and Montessori tested their pedagogies in classrooms and learned much through the practice. Others followed suite. A.S. Neill started a school at Summerhill that wholeheartedly embraced self-directed learning. Students were allowed to follow their own

interests and curiosity, free from compulsion. They were also given democratic voice in the operation of the school, so that a young child had an equal vote to the headmaster in decisions of staffing, budget, and curricular choices. A similar school, the Sudbury Valley School, was started in Framingham, Massachusetts by Daniel Greenberg. These schools spurred multiple movements in U.S. education. The free school movement was part of the countercultural revolution of the 1960s. Free school ideology rejected the American consumerism and commercialism that had taken hold of public education and instead sought to create a disparate network of democratic schools. Likewise, homeschool and unschool movements sought to wrench educational authority away from the government and instead place it in the hands of students, parents, and communities. John Holt and Ivan Illich were influential voices in all of these movements. Concurrently, Citizenship Schools existed in the 1950s and 1960s in response to racist voting laws that demanded Black citizens pass a literacy test in order to vote. These schools operated as adult literacy centers and worked to open up pathways to political power for marginalized communities.

In the 1970s, self-directed learning emerged as a branch of adult education. Malcolm Knowles was influential in bringing the term to mainstream educational discourse, which led to an increase in research literature in self-directedness. The International Society of Self-Directed Learning (ISSDL) began holding an annual symposium to share the latest in SDL research. This research was primarily quantitative in nature and mostly concerned with self-directedness as a cognitive process (e.g. Guglielmino, 1978; Long, 1989). This body of research led to the recognition of SDL as a valid field of inquiry but was disconnected from the history of SDL-related education philosophies. This dissertation sought to connect the history of SDL to current research and practice.

Current Understandings of Self-Directed Learning

Chapter Three presented the highlights of SDL research since the 1980s. Of particular importance were the characteristics of SDL, the role of the environment and experiences, the role of the educator, the role of peers, and the role of the learners themselves. The characteristics of a self-directed learner were presented by Long and Agyekum (1983) and Guglielmino (1978) as someone who was creative, showed initiative, was resourceful, persistent, curious, and self-regulating. It should be noted that these researchers were working within the field of adult education and that this research was steeped in cognitive psychology which differs considerably from the philosophical foundations of this dissertation as presented in the first chapter.

Albert Bandura's (1977, 1985, 1989, 1997) concept of self-efficacy argued that a person could, over time, develop the skills of SDL as identified above. Particularly, Social Cognitive Theory argued that a person's self-efficacy (what they think they are capable of) is dependent upon the interplay between a person's behavior, their environment, and their cognitive beliefs about themselves. Changes in any of those domains (behavior, environment, and cognition) can influence a person's sense of what they can accomplish, which in turn can lead to the development of character traits like resourcefulness and persistence.

After exploring the research regarding the skills and characteristics of SDL, attention was then paid to the role of the environment in SDL spaces. Schools that are designed with learner autonomy in mind tend to look and feel different than schools designed for learner compliance. The environments tend to be less institutional and more home-like. Workspaces are often flexible. Instead of desks lined in rows facing a teacher, SDL environments often contain a mix of collaborative hubs and individual workstations. Environment also includes governing forces like rules and schedules. In SDL spaces, these tend to be negotiated by learners and not just

ordained by teachers and administrators. Often, in SDL spaces (like Summerhill, Sudbury Valley Schools, and Acton Academies) learners create the rules and consequence structure on their own but with the guidance of adults.

In addition to the environment, the type of learning experiences offered in SDL spaces differ from traditional school curricula. Some SDL spaces, like Summerhill, offer a variety of courses that learners can (but are not required to) take as they please. Others, like Acton Academy, offer blocks of time where learners choose the content of their learning and their pacing (for example, a learner may choose to read a book for an hour and then work on math for an hour). Often, SDL schools seek to create transdisciplinary projects that combine analytic and communication skills to solve a pressing problem in the community. There are a variety of ways that SDL schools infuse learning experiences into their designs. The key feature, though, is that these experiences center the experience and agency of the learner and eschew top-down, compulsory approaches to learning.

There is also a markedly different imagining of the role of the educator in SDL spaces than in traditional schools. In most traditional schools, public and private alike, the teacher is given the responsibility to transfer knowledge, through lectures, readings, or projects, to the learners, to assess their learning, and to manage their behavior. In SDL spaces, most of that responsibility is given to the learners themselves. They are the ones to track down the knowledge that is relevant to their current inquiry. There is still need of an educator, though. The educator (often referred to as a guide or facilitator rather than teacher) is presented as a helpful mentor who can provoke the learner to ponder their current situation, assist in diagnosing a learning need, help identify useful resources or strategies, and provide support in evaluating learning projects. This reimagining of what it means to be an educator is freeing for the teacher and

learner alike, as both have agency to learn from and teach others in joint inquiry instead of following mandated curriculum and pacing guides determined by someone far removed from the learning context.

Chapter Three also highlighted the potential for SDL schools to be more equitable learning environments. Traditional school environments (public and private) place power in the hands of teachers and administrators to evaluate the skills and abilities learners and accordingly sort learners into differing schooling tracks. Some learners may be placed into remedial courses while others are labeled "gifted." It was shown that there is often disparity between how teachers view learners' abilities and how learners view themselves. Often this disparity is racially biased. It was argued that SDL spaces, since they empower learners to control their own education, can mitigate against teacher bias and center the democratic voice of all in the school have to potential to create more equitable schools.

The conversation on equity pivoted into an even larger discussion on school privatization. SDL schools tend to be small and privately owned. They also tend to be heavily influenced by a libertarian political philosophy that can be at odds with a vision of education as a public good. It was argued that, instead of threatening public education, SDL schools can in fact serve as lab schools — small experimental spaces that can employ learner-centric pedagogies and share their findings with public and private education partners. These spaces could provide imaginative sparks as well as provocative research to convince more and more educators and policymakers that learners can and should lead their own education.

Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning

Chapter Four made a philosophical argument that education has two equally important purposes: cultivating the conditions for an individual to grow and flourish in wisdom,

knowledge, and abilities and to create a vibrant, democratic society that allows full participation and enjoyment to all of its members. It was argued that traditional education (both public and private) has failed to advance both of these goals. The argument was made that individuals, in metrics of happiness and financial well-being, are not flourishing. Also, society as a whole is extremely polarized, lacking in the ability to understand other viewpoints and pragmatically solve shared problems. Schools are failing to cultivate flourishing individuals who together join in the work of creating a flourishing society.

It was argued that schools can in fact serve this role in society, but in order to do so a new vision of schooling is required. This led to the presentation of Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning, defined as *the process in which human beings, growing in internal virtues, external skills and abilities, knowledge, and wisdom within a community, are given responsibility to freely choose a life that leads to their own happiness and collectively participate in creating a society in which all can flourish*. This view of education combines the rich history of SDL with Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia, which refers to the happiness that accompanies a life well-lived. Chapter Four argued that an education that truly sought to cultivate good humans through practical learning and growing in wisdom and virtue would in turn create a good society. This is neither a novel nor innovative approach to education but, as Chapter Two highlighted, has a rich and diverse history.

Implications for Future Research

Now that the case has been made that self-directed learning has a long and philosophically rich tradition in the history of education, that numerous examples testify to the effectiveness of this type of education approach, and that the notion of Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning has been presented as an education philosophy aimed at cultivating flourishing

individuals and a flourishing society, numerous questions and threads of inquiry remain. Though this dissertation has in large part served as a historical survey, it really is a type of starting point. The goal was to connect current SDL research and discourse with the literature and philosophies of the past in order to create a common ground for moving forward. The field of SDL is ripe for research and inquiry. A few of the many implications for future research are discussed below.

SDL and Neurodiversity

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2021), 14% of students in public schools receive special education support due to diagnosed disabilities. There is a lack of research in the field of SDL on how neurodiverse learners (e.g., children who have been diagnosed with autism or attention disorders) engage in self-directedness. The argument was made in Chapter Three of this dissertation that the skills of SDL are learnable and dynamic, not fixed. Missing from this research, however, were specific studies in student populations that typically receive educational support through an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP).

SDL and Virtual Learning

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools shifted to virtual learning environments. A pertinent line of inquiry from this dissertation is how virtual learning from home impacts a student's self-directedness. In Chapter Two, the homeschooling and unschooling movements of the late 20th century were discussed. It is important to note that homeschooling does not equate to SDL. Homeschooling can be a very other-directed learning experience. The advent of virtual learning, though, is adding new complexities to the homeschooling discussion. Children can now be at home, but also virtually connected to teachers and peers from around the world. It should be noted that online classes are not a new phenomenon, nor is distance learning, and there exists

a wide body of research into those educational approaches. What is new and deserving of further study is how virtual learning either helps or hinders a person's self-directedness.

SDL and the Technocratic Society

SDL schools like Acton Academy are built upon the assumption that computers have replaced textbooks and teachers. The assumption holds that most of the knowledge relevant to a learner can be found in online spaces. What is missing from the field is a critical inquiry into the rise of technology in education with specific attention paid to the consumeristic powers that are driving this technologizing. Who is benefiting from this technological age in schooling? What are the social, emotional, and mental impacts of this technological transformation on children? Does this infusion of technology into schools hinder democratic engagement? What is the relationship between education, democracy, technology, and technocracy (a system of government where the technicians have the power)?

SDL and Compulsory Education

Throughout this dissertation, especially in the historical survey in Chapter Two, attention was paid to the concept of compulsory education, or the idea that schooling should be in some way forced or required by law. Many of the education philosophies presented in the history of SDL pushed back forcefully against the notion of forced learning. More research is called for, particularly into the interplay of education, eudaimonia, and democracy. As has been shown, SDL has its foundations in the freedom of the individual and the idea of natural curiosity — people are desirous of knowledge and will seek it out. What about preparing civically minded citizens? In the absence of compulsory education, how will democracy be maintained? This dissertation has presented arguments that the current system of education is not living up to its

ideals in maintaining democracy. What is missing is more informed discussion around the risks and benefits in removing compulsory attendance laws.

SDL and Equity

It was argued in this dissertation that SDL spaces have the potential to mitigate against educator bias by moving choices around learning pathways to the learners themselves. What is needed in the field now is to follow through on this hypothesis and research into how SDL spaces either are or are not serving this role as equity enablers. In what ways have SDL spaces cultivated equitable learning environments? In what ways have SDL environments continued to reproduce inequity? What needs to happen so that schools are actually living into their potential to create individual and societal flourishing for all members?

SDL and Higher Education

Another line of inquiry is the depreciation of the college degree and the loss of gatekeeper status by institutions of higher education. It was once the assumption in the American education system that one needed a college degree in order to be successful in the workplace. The rise, though, of online learning experiences, diverse workshops and certification routes, and alternatives to degree programs has weakened the hold of higher education as a gatekeeper to a successful career. Research into SDL and its impact on higher education would be beneficial in highlighting potential pathways forward for colleges and universities. How can institutions of higher education once again be seen as hubs of learning — offering expertise, resources, and community to inquiring minds?

SDL and Character Education

A key argument in this dissertation is that education should be concerned with cultivating in young people wisdom and internal virtues. There is a need in the field to explore what

character education looks and feels like in self-directed spaces. How can school design allow for agency and choice while also intentionally seeking to build internal virtues? How can this character education recognize the plurality of society while cultivating shared virtues?

SDL and the Role of School in Society

I argued in this dissertation that school still has a vital role to play in a democratic society. The concept of Eudemonic Self-Directed Learning was presented to show that school can be a place that cultivates both individual and societal flourishing. More research and argumentation are needed. SDL schools, especially as they grow in numbers and influence, have much to offer education researchers. The next steps are to build networks of collaboration where parents, learners, educators, researchers, theorists, and policy makers can share knowledge and together argue for a renewed vision of education in America.

Final Reflection

This study into the history and complexities of self-directed learning is about much more than a niche educational approach found primarily in expensive private schools. This dissertation is an argument for the *why* of education. Why does society school its young? Is it to merely prepare them for some future careers, a way to ensure that the right jobs get filled decades from now? The argument that has been made through these five chapters is that education is really embedded in the human experience. People have a natural bent toward learning. They are curious and seek out knowledge on their own. Humans are problem solvers by nature, and problem solvers are de facto philosophers who wrestle with complexities and unknowns in search of meaning.

Education is the process of walking forth into this meaning-making journey. It has been argued that education can and should lead to individual flourishing, which means a person

should grow in the knowledge, skills, abilities, and virtues needed to lead a good and happy life. Education is not just an individual endeavor though, as it is through education that society is reproduced. Therefore, education cannot just be for the self, but must also be for others. An argument has been made in this dissertation for an education that leads to flourishing people and a flourishing society.

At this point, it is necessary to guard against utopian idealism. Education is never going to be a clean, easy, conflict-free process. Learning is messy and hard. Growing and maturing are difficult, both for individuals and a collective. The point here is not that infusing SDL into learning design will immediately solve the world's problems. Rather, the argument is that this view of education has been advanced for millennia. There are present day people still putting this learning into practice, keeping alive the theories espoused by Aristotle, Rousseau, Du Bois, Dewey, Holt, and others. There have always been voices arguing for a view of education that cultivates good humans and a good society. This dissertation is a way for me to chronicle their arguments and add my voice to the chorus. Another world is possible, though it will take dreaming and daring on the part of educators to slowly, generation by generation, bring it into existence. The work is left unfinished but there are lots of reasons to enter into it with hope.

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