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Pedagogy of empowerment: co-produced self-directed pedagogic spaces for inclusion

Thomas Howard Morris [a], Ben Simmons [a], Sarah McLaughlin [b], Stuart Read[a], Anne Parfitt[a], Chloe Shu-Hua Yeh [a] and Bethan Mitchell [c]

[a]School of Education, Bath Spa University, Bath, England; [b]Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, England; [c]Faculty of Life Sciences and Education, University of South Wales, Newport, Wales

ABSTRACT

What is more important in education than inclusion? In this present paper we argue that inclusion must be the starting point in the design of education. We focus on *how* all students can be included in the process of learning in formal education settings. We theoretically explore (a) whether applying a self-directed learning framework in education can enable co-produced pedagogic spaces, and then (b) the potential for self-directed co-produced pedagogic spaces to facilitate inclusion 'in' and 'through' education. We conclude that applying a self-directed learning framework in education could enable co-production at all pedagogical phases – planning, undertaking, and reviewing phases of learning; and that some inclusion of self-directed learning and/or elements of power-sharing possibilities would (arguably) be facilitative in terms of enabling inclusion *in* and *through* education. Further research in this novel topic area is recommended.

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Introduction

What is more important in education than inclusion? In this present paper we argue that inclusion must be the starting point – and key value – in the design and practice of education. In this respect, a very recent systematic review (Morris et al. 2025), which explored the known connections between the constructs of *self-directed learning* and *inclusion*, highlighted the potential for self-directed learning to be used as a theoretical framework to enable inclusion 'in' and 'through' education. However, the review also noted the infancy of this research area and that further research, including theoretical exploration, is required.

To address this call for further research, the present paper seeks to theoretically explore how applying a self-directed learning framework in education can enable co-produced pedagogic spaces, and then the potential for *self-directed co-produced pedagogic spaces* to facilitate inclusion *in* and *through* education. We believe this present work is novel and original, and our aim is to spark further debate, discussion, and research in this area.

CONTACT Thomas Howard Morris t.morris@bathspa.ac.uk

In respect of the need to revisit the key values of our educational practice, Biesta (2024, 2) has highlighted the point that

> … there is a danger that education, and particularly the practice of education, is quickly taken over by other logics, agendas, and priorities. This is what has happened and is continuing to happen due to the impact of the global education measurement industry, which has been trying to redefine the main concerns of education in terms of producing measurable learning outcomes that can then be plotted against each other in order to decide which systems or countries perform "best." In my view, this has resulted in a massive distortion of educational practice in many countries around the world.

In this regard, this present paper is also a (re-)call for action: should we not design our education with the very simple idea that 'every learner matters equally' (UNESCO 2022)? Specifically, a core focus of education should be that we make *every* effort possible so that 'education' works for every learner, and so: every learner should matter 'in' education and 'through' education (Lazenby 2016; Napoletano 2024). But, we go beyond this concept, by highlighting the point that inclusion in and through education may only work effectively if learners come to learn with, be with, and work with each other; and this includes learning to respect and celebrate our individual differences.

In respect of the importance of empowering all learners in and through education, we shall reflect on John Dewey's point that the 'main purpose or objective [of education] is to prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life' (Dewey [1938] 1963, 18). And on this point, we identify how pedagogy in schools and other educational spaces can be designed to be inclusive for *all* learners, with learners and teachers working, *together*, with each other. Furthermore, at this point we should identify that an important outcome of 'inclusivity' in education is that it raises awareness and acceptance of diversity which has wider social benefits (Diamond and Huang 2005; Watson et al. 2025).

We believe that many educational policy makers worldwide agree with the idea that education should work for every person. However, from our professional experience as researchers in education, it is quite clear that education is a complex phenomenon: it is a process that concerns individual human beings who learn differently, have different learning interests, needs, and preferences. And, thus education – to work for every person – *must* consider that the process is one of working with *humans* (*individuals*).

In this paper we present a pedagogical discussion that aligns with humanistic philosophical assumptions. Humanistic philosophical assumptions include that learners have unique and unlimited potential for growth, determined by their self-concept and individual understanding of the world; have an intrinsic motive to be autonomous beings; have a sense of responsibility to themselves and others; are inherently good natured; possess an urge toward self-actualisation; and, in comparison to other species, humans have an extraordinary ability to learn, grow, and develop (Elias and Merriam 2005; Siswadi 2024).

In considering the importance of *humans* in education, the focus of the present paper is didactical. At this point, we should identify that there are wider considerations – in terms of 'inclusion' – in respect of who gets included, how, and why (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2010; Kauffman 2020; Race 2024; Thomas and Loxley 2022). In the present paper we will focus on the *how* – in terms of how *all* students can be included

in the process of learning in formal education settings. In the following sections we examine theories of inclusion followed by a discussion on whether enabling teachers and learners as 'co-producers' in pedagogic spaces can enable inclusion. Finally, we explore whether applying a self-directed learning framework in education can enable co-produced pedagogic spaces, and then the potential for self-directed co-produced pedagogic spaces to facilitate inclusion 'in' and 'through' education.

Inclusion in schools

Inclusion as a contested construct

Despite the proliferation of the term 'inclusion' in national and international education policy literatures, there is no single, agreed upon definition (Kauffman 2020; Mitchell 2005). This has led to conceptual confusion, and there is on-going debate about the meaning, purpose, and practice of 'inclusive education'. For example, debates often revolve around the 'location' of inclusion. Inclusion is sometimes seen as being synonymous with 'mainstream education', and children are described as being 'included' if they simply attend a mainstream (regular; ordinary) school. In this respect,

> Inclusive education means all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded – not only children with disabilities, but speakers of minority languages too. (UNICEF, n.d.)

This view of inclusion can be found in contexts where certain groups have historically lacked access to formal schooling. However, and perhaps not surprisingly, the extent to which the simple presence of children in school can be considered an 'inclusive' form of education has been called into question, though there is often disagreement about why a simple view is problematic (Goodall 2018; Poon-McBrayer 2012; Qvortrup and Qvortrup 2017). From a rights perspective, inclusive education and mainstream education are not synonymous, but they are closely intertwined. Inclusion – as a fundamental right – involves supported access to mainstream education. For example, the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD 2006) asserts that States Parties must ensure

> that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary and secondary education on the basis of disability (Article 24, 2a) … [and that] … persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education. (Article 24, 2d)

Despite UNCRPD (2006) assertions, some commentators have called into question the extent to which all children can be educated together in a mainstream school, and there has been renewed support for segregated education for certain groups. For example, children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) are described as too cognitively impaired to benefit from a generalised, subject-based curriculum, and that the inclusion of this group requires special schools with uniquely trained staff, resources and developmentally appropriate pedagogy and curriculum (see Simmons 2021a). This view resonates with UK government policy, which dislocates the concept of inclusive education from mainstream education and interprets inclusion as something

that can occur within special schools (UNCRPD 2006, *Interpretative Declaration on Education* – Convention Article 24 Clause 2 [a] and [b]).

In addition to 'locational' debates in the inclusion field, the literature also contains discussion about purpose and practice of inclusion. These discussions often revolve around concepts of equality, which itself is a contested concept. For example, Lazenby (2016) makes the important distinction between equality 'in' education and equality 'through' education. The former dimension concerns what happens in schools in respect to how we can make things fair and equal. The latter element concerns what education does for us later in life.

Regarding equality 'in' education, the literature presents a range of ideas. For example, philosophers such as Jencks (1988) differentiate between democratic equality (where each and every child receives the same amount of resources and support in school); moralistic justice (which concerns who deserves extra goods based on good behaviour and motivation); forms of humane social justice (whereby some children are provided with extra resources and support to help them keep up with peers [an equality of outcome model that aims to 'level up' socially disadvantaged and/or disabled children]); and utilitarianism (which could be viewed by some as a controversial viewpoint linked to a neoliberal economy, whereby resources and support are distributed to people who are more likely to generate further capital [an investment model]).

However, debates in the inclusion field about the meaning of equality sometimes overlook the *purpose* of education (Schuelka and Engsig 2022). There are debates about who requires, or is entitled to, more support and resources and how this should be funded (Meijer and Watkins 2019); but our concern in this paper is about the actual purpose of the resources. In this respect, it could be argued that the neoliberal education system primarily seeks to produce more profitable workers. Specifically, whilst we may agree that children with 'additional support needs' or 'special educational needs and disabilities' (SEND) should have more support (the United Kingdom's definition of special educational 'need' means that regular provision is not suitable and something additional is required) (Department of Education & Department of Health 2015), it could be argued that it is, *rather*, the process and purpose of the education that needs to be unpicked, before such resourcing is provided.

It has been argued that inclusion may be viewed as an idea, perhaps an ideology, that is both celebrated and rejected. It is arguably celebrated because its goal is to create a more inclusive society. But, on the other hand, it may be rejected as being utopian, impractical and ill-defined (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2010; Kovač and Vaala 2021). There is a lack of clear guidance from pedagogic practice about how we create an inclusive educational environment, but that in itself is to be expected if the meaning of inclusion is unclear, intangible, and contested. However, we believe that the lack of prescription is exactly what makes inclusion a powerful tool.

Inclusion may be interpreted as resistance against, arguably, neoliberal-based education policies found in late-capitalist societies, which value performativity and individualism over community-building. Through this lens, inclusion may be seen as a *radical pedagogy* (cf. Freire 1970), as something that embodies the social model of disability (cf. Shakespeare 2017), and concerns the raising consciousness of educational staff and students to resist neoliberal education systems (Greenstein 2016). The ideas presented in this paper may therefore be seen by some as a radical pedagogy. On this, it may be

argued that radical measures may indeed be needed in some educational contexts to enable an inclusive pedagogy.

In terms of the psychology of inclusion, scholars have highlighted the importance of consideration and acknowledgement of unconscious bias, defined as 'the systematic error experienced in decision making' (Suveren 2022, 414). Biases happen as individuals try to make sense of the available information beyond their information processing capacity, hence taking mental shortcuts causing prejudice toward out-groups who they are not familiar with (Suveren 2022). Hence, the unconscious bias can lead to subtle forms of automative processing of prejudice and stereotyping amongst all members of contemporary society, including most members who endorse egalitarianism. In fact, egalitarians who hold strong egalitarian beliefs would need to particularly cautiously examine their prejudice and stereotyping toward out-group members caused by unconscious biases as they tend to loath to be consider themselves to be prejudiced (Dovidio and Gaertner 2004).

In their seminal work on aversive racism, Dovidio and Gaertner (2004) acknowledged the potential conflicts between whites' conscious endorsement of egalitarian principles and unconscious negative feelings and beliefs about blacks by articulating separately the conscious and unconscious components of aversive racism. That is, the process producing implicit prejudiced feelings are considered automatic and unconscious; whereas egalitarian beliefs are deliberated with intention and effort. In this respect, Bodenhausen and Richeson (2010, 348) discuss that 'prejudiced feelings and egalitarian beliefs coexist in the minds of most if not all members of contemporary society. Even when people explicitly reject prejudice and stereotypes, they may nevertheless fall prey to automatic activation – just like mental reflex'.

In this regard, arguably, we need to accept that 'understanding inclusion' is not equivalent to 'practicing inclusion', in which the latter is another set of skills. Practicing inclusion requires all individuals to make an effort to understand intentionally and pay attention to the physical and psychological needs of the minority who can be potentially feeling excluded in a heterogeneous society setting where potential tensions arise. This is consistent with the United Nations view of inclusion since the 1990s (e.g. UNESCO [*Salamanca Statement*], 1994), which views inclusion as a vehicle through which we can accomplish social cohesion and acceptance of diversity and difference (UNCRPD 2006).

Traditional education as dehumanising

We define *traditional education* as education that encompasses forms of teaching and learning, in which the *teacher holds responsibility* to direct the means and objectives of learning that are often linked to or derived from a centralised curricular. Traditional education may often represent a process of knowledge and skill *inculcation*, in which the learning objectives and means are uniform for all learners (Knowles et al. 2020). Traditional education is typified by high classification and framing (Bernstein 1990), where the 'what' and 'how' of learning are tightly controlled by the teacher (or/and curricular). In this respect, an important point here is that – in terms of epistemology, and what counts as worthwhile knowledge – such educational forms produce a power imbalance in terms of epistemology: in that the teacher (or centralised curriculum, and thus

curricular designers) hold power in terms of what is considered worthwhile knowledge (the 'what') and how such knowledge is best inculcated (the 'how').

Freire (1970) called this process a dehumanising process – which he named the 'banking' concept – where a teacher's job is to fill the learners' heads with predefined knowledge and skill; and the more that the teacher is able to successfully fill the heads of learners the better a teacher they are, and the more 'successful' the process of 'education'. And, importantly, *the more traditional education is practiced the more dehumanising the education* (cf. Freire 1970). We really do not need to dwell on the ills of such traditional forms of education, but we should acknowledge that *the process is not inclusive for all learners* (cf. Vandenbroeck 2021).

Co-produced pedagogic spaces in education

Traditional concepts of space presuppose that space is a kind of container, what Merleau-Ponty (2002) refers to as 'objective space' (81) whereby the contents of space (which may include ourselves and other people) are understood primarily in terms of physical proximity to one another (cf. Simmons 2021b). This contrasts to 'bodily space' (Simmons 2021b, 117), which can be interpreted in terms of how the world becomes experienced as personal and meaningful via our embodiment. Foucault (2020) also develops a novel concept of space by examining what he calls 'heterotopia' (179), defined as 'different spaces … other places, a kind of contestation, both mythical and real, of the space in which we live' (179). Heterotopic spaces might be thought of as countersites which directly or indirectly threaten the status quo, or at least challenge the order of things.

Merelau-Ponty's (2002) and Foucault's (2020) concept of space complement Lefebvre's (1991) work in this area. Lefebvre proposes that space is prescribed, performed and experienced, and he develops a 'spatial triad' (38) model to guide analysis of space. The spatial triad consists of three interlinked concepts: (i) representations of space (sometimes referred to as 'abstract space'), (ii) spatial practices, and (iii) representational spaces (sometimes referred to as 'lived space'). Lefebvre's first concept of space is abstract space, a space that refers 'to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to frontal relations' (1991). Abstract spaces are conceptualised spaces, made up of symbols, terminology, technical jargon, and paradigms used by professionals and institutions. Merrifield (2006) describes abstract space as 'what's in the head rather than in the body' (109). Embedded in abstract space are the 'logic and forms of knowledge, and the ideological content of codes, theories, and the conceptual depictions of space' (Shields 1999, 163). These discourses of abstract space codify dominant epistemological approaches by which truth and validity are measured (Watkins 2005).

The second part of Lefebvre's (1991, 33) triad is 'spatial practice', which 'embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets of characteristics of each social formation'. Spatial practice refers to performance and the enactment of competences required for the everyday functions of society and social cohesion: 'In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance' (1991). Spatial practices are described as secreting society's space and include 'patterns and interactions that connect places and people, images with reality, work with

leisure' (Merrifield 2006, 110). In educational contexts, spatial practice is based on descriptions found in abstract space, which prescribes how to interpret, think and act in schools. Spatial practices are professional discourses, forms of knowledge, and codes of conduct that shape practice.

The final concept in Lefebvre's (1991) triad is 'lived space'. This concept describes space as 'directly lived through' and is the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users' (39). Lived spaces embody 'complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, and also to art' (1991, 33). Lived spaces can be interpreted as having an alternative, radical or resistive quality, operating outside of the prescribed rules (Merrifield 2006) and are thus deviations from abstract space which dominates day-to-day routine. Lived space is the feelings of contradiction, conflict, ambiguity and non-conformity. It is not a neutral experience, but an experience loaded with conflict, suggesting that protocol is not followed, where practitioners intuitively feel that something is not working, and where novel forms of engagement are allowed to emerge. Lived space is a space which breaks free from abstract space, and in doing so leads to new forms of action.

When we think about co-produced pedagogic spaces, we draw on the above ideas of space, whereby space is *personal* to each teacher and learner, with such personal meaning stemming from the sedimented histories and experiences that each agent brings, which influence the shaping of pedagogy (Merleau-Ponty 2002). The emergent pedagogy has the potential to contradict what has been traditionally prescribed, and leads to heterotopic or counter spaces, allowing the imagination to become real and contradict school norms (Foucault 2020). This moves teachers away from abstract space that describe idealised forms of teaching practices, which shape interpretations and behaviours of school staff (i.e. their spatial practices); thus allowing for lived space to be foregrounded, where student and teacher feelings, experience and personal histories can find space to co-exist, allowing for new forms of pedagogy to be imagined and explored (Lefebvre 1991).

Spatial metaphors are often cited in education theory as a way of understanding practice; for example, the notion of peripheral participation in *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991), the *rhizomatic* nature of connections (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), and networks in *actor-network theory* (Latour 2007). Conceptualising space when exploring education theory can be a meaningful alternative to temporal approaches, such as narrative analysis (Ruitenberg 2007). For instance, the metaphor of networks in actor-network theory describes the situational and relational aspects of entities with regards to how the network holds together, rather than an emphasis on actants within the network. Actants include humans and non-humans, which allows for materials and effects to be foregrounded; for example, the role of the classroom door key has a significant effect on teacher practice if it restricts access to the classroom (Fenwick and Edwards 2010). This perspective takes the emphasis away from 'who' is included (or not) and considers the forces and connections that relate the actants together. This flattened hierarchy decentres the human as the sole source of agency and illuminates insights that might otherwise be overlooked. The emphasis on the self forms a dominant discourse in education, and can be challenged by conceptualising learning and knowledge as network effects rather than individual attributes.

Drawing from actor-network theory presents a different way of understanding the position and inclusion of the 'learner'. Learning is presented as a dynamic and emerging network property that affects practices as a whole, and that can be affected by mundane and everyday objects as well as human actants. Consider, for example, the effect of text colour and font on reading practices. The change in colour and format creates different connections within the network, allowing knowledge and learning to circulate in different ways. The facility to *change* format is related to the availability of software and applications, which in turn is related to the inclusion of programmes and computer hardware. The concept of inclusion becomes a network property involving people and things in relation to one another, as an alternative to the potentially deficit approaches to learners perceived as having additional needs. The social model of disability can foreground the environment, rather than the individual, which can facilitate inclusion by moving towards co-designing pedagogic spaces (Knight and Crick 2022).

Placing value on student expression – celebrating our individuality

There is robust evidence pertaining to the idea that involving learners in educational decision making and listening to their experiences as students – valuing all students' expressions – is an essential part of celebrating our individuality. And, in terms of inclusion, pedagogies *must* take *diverse needs* of all learners into account (Husbands and Pearce 2012; Sanger 2020). In this respect, hooks (1994) called for an *engaged pedagogy*, where value is placed on *student expression*, rather than knowledge and skill inculcation, that aims to enhance students' capacity to live fully and deeply. For hooks (1994), if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can truly begin, children need to be taught in a way that their 'souls' are respected and cared for. For this to happen teachers must have the will to respond to each learner as a unique *individual*. This is a move away from the aforementioned 'banking' model as an approach to teaching. Rather than learners being passive receptacles in education, both teacher and students should be *active participants*.

In this regard, hooks draws upon Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientisation*, highlighting the point that within such educational conditions – that encourage and celebrate *student expression* – pedagogy can concomitantly manifest itself into raising the *critical consciousness* of learners. A key component of critical consciousness is the ability to recognise injustice and inequality (Darder 2020; Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil 1999). It is a socio-political form of critical thinking, and an awareness of inequality, which can lead to social and political action. In pedagogical terms, hooks (1994) calls educators to think and rethink, ultimately calling for a movement that makes education the practice of freedom and of building support for liberation from oppression through learning.

Awareness of and enabling the emancipation from oppression is the key target of critical consciousness. The critically conscious teacher is key to facilitating such pedagogical transformation through their motivation to challenge practices and structures which foster social exclusion in education. Indeed, hooks (2013, 7) advocates thinking as action, arguing 'thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers'. However, teachers need to be trusted and given time to think, reflect and plan in order to be inclusive. They must respond to all learners' individual differences and ways of learning.

Importantly, teacher competence is significant to such pedagogical transformations. Competence of the education practitioner – which includes skills and knowledge that enable a teacher to be successful – has a significant impact upon their inclusive practice (Boyle, Anderson, and Allen 2020; de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert 2011). Nonetheless, teacher competence must be supported and enhanced to ensure they have appropriate skills, knowledge and crucially the values to successfully implement inclusive pedagogical practice for the empowerment of all their learners (Pit-ten Cate et al. 2018). Thus, a teacher's professional competence not only refers to their subject knowledge, skills and attitudes, it also relates to their own philosophies of learning; this means teacher's own belief systems, regarding education impact and the extent to which they may work effectively to enable inclusive pedagogical spaces.

Pedagogical space for coming together explicitly to engage with each other

The framing of co-produced pedagogic spaces can be likened to the original ideas of the 'ba' (a Japanese concept that translates roughly to the English word 'place'), which denotes the field on which learners – those seeking knowledge – *come together explicitly* to *engage with each other* (Nonaka and Konno 1998). Roles such as learners and teachers are merely temporary, as activity in the 'ba' often requires that these are dropped as the individuals in the focal space give and take, in order to create new understandings. Each focal 'ba' is nested, similar in format to 'Russian Dolls': the various layers of organisational and societal frames can prove advantageous as well as potentially damaging to creativity.

Turning to what happens within one 'ba', participating individuals can only become truly involved if they step outside of their own limited boundaries and relinquish narrow perspectives that may be personally learnt biases and/or institutionally embedded discriminatory practices. Inclusion (Slee 2011) is a prerequisite for the 'ba-based' creative processes to function effectively: the socialisation, externalisation, internalisation and combination of knowledge(s). Under this lens, the marginalisation and exclusion of individuals according to differential statuses is entirely counterproductive. For, it is invariably these 'others' (Bauman 2004; Sibley 1995; Titchkosky 2020) who contribute the creative shift that renders our distal thoughts proximal (e.g. Polanyi 1967).

Ableism and 'crip theory' applications

Ableism in the context of education refers to the systemic processes which place *artificial value* on being 'able bodied' and 'able-minded', and so in turn acts to segregate and devalue individuals who do not fit this ideal of body (Campbell 2009). Crip theory, too, challenges this narrative of 'ableness', arguing that societal structures embed and enact 'compulsory able-bodiedness', in which unattainable expectations are placed on the 'normal' body (McRuer 2006). Crip theory can help inform how ableist practices within education remain immune to change, as the idealised version of body is continually strived for (e.g. education systems value 'able-mindedness', and assessments of 'success' within education are viewed as synonymous with being 'able-minded'; Taylor and Shallish 2019).

In other words, achievement within educational environments is recognised as, and attributed to, internal strengths within individuals rather than questioning the systemic biases that advantageously benefit certain bodies at the expense of others (Taylor and Shallish 2019). Crucially, ableism and crip theory do not just implicate disabled people: the theories argue that ableism is rooted in existing systemic understandings of exclusion (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, etc.), whereby all bodies are subject to approval or segregation according to colonist, gendered, heteronormative and whiteness ideals (e.g. Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013; Campbell 2009). In our pursuit of inclusion within education, consideration of disability theory can help to open discussions regarding how the education sector can become *fully* inclusive.

Applying a self-directed learning framework to enable co-produced pedagogic spaces

The intention of this section is to begin a debate in the educational literature about the potentiality of applying a self-directed learning framework to enable co-produced pedagogic spaces. At first thought, and for those who are not deeply familiar with self-directed learning theory, this application may seem ill fitting. To the knowledge of the authors, what we are presenting here is a wholly novel idea that could, theoretically, be fitting to any educational setting.

The model presented in Figure 1 should be interpreted with the initial principle that: *inclusion must be* the *starting point* in the design of education: that every learner matters equally (cf. UNESCO 2022). Therefore, education must work for every learner. It is important to point out that although Figure 1 presented in the present paper is novel, many of the foundational ideas that underpin this model are not new. Rather the originality of the model lies in both the application and synthesis of the theoretical underpinnings.

Inclusion in learning

Self-directed learning is a process in which a learner 'direct[s] one's own learning means and objectives in order to meet definable personal goals' (Morris 2019a, 302). In practice this means that the learner's preferences for 'what' and 'how' they learn are respected. In any instance the teacher must avoid, at all times where practically possible, rejecting learners' choice and responsibility over means and objectives unless considered necessary (e.g. where learning ideas could be potentially harmful or dangerous, cf. Morris 2019b). It is a process in which learners (with or without the help of others) have *choice* in how and what they learn. In comparison to traditional learning forms, this may initially be viewed as radical; but this will depend on the context of application.

The process stands in stark contrast to traditional education, which may often represent a process of knowledge and skill *inculcation*, where the learning objectives and means are uniform for all learners (Knowles et al. 2020). Rather, there is an alignment to humanistic philosophical assumptions – which includes that learners have *unique* and unlimited potential for growth. Uniqueness is important here because it values and celebrates our (*human*) individual differences. What is different here is that the

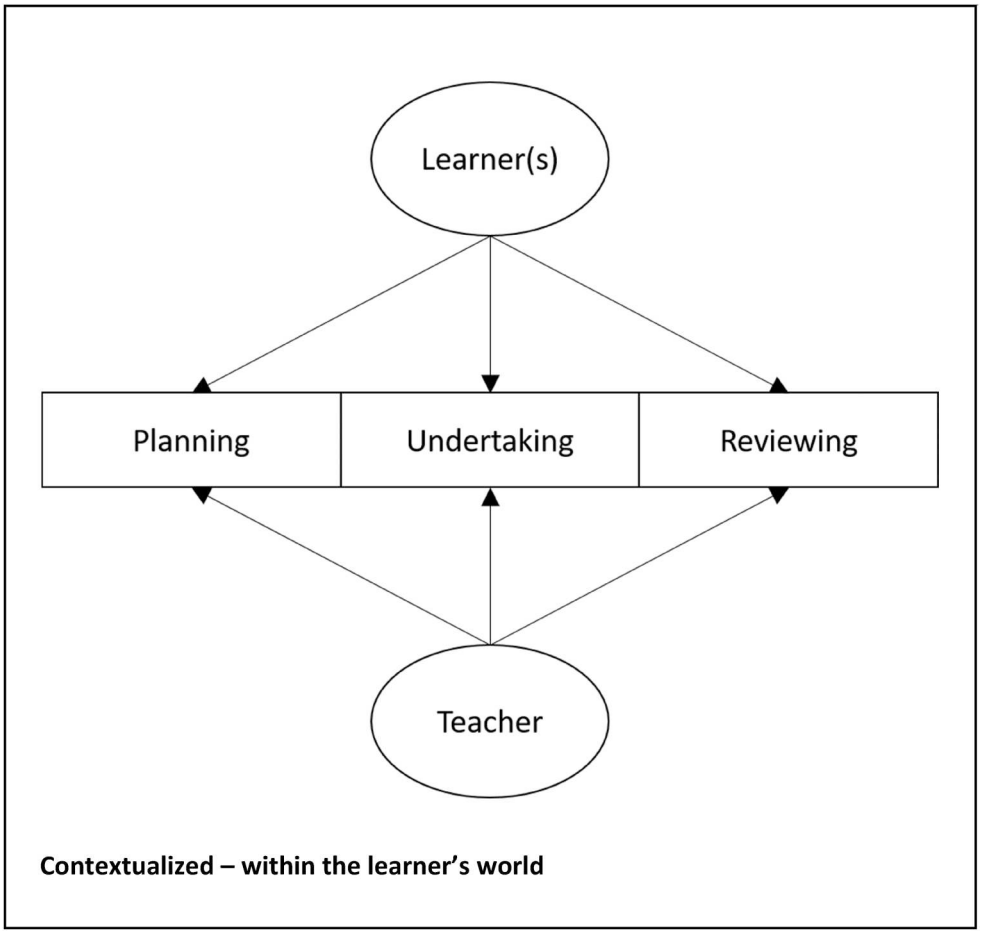

Figure 1. The co-produced pedagogic spaces model of self-directed learning.

learner has (a share of) control over determining what and how they learn, and this will result in different learning outcomes.

Importantly, the process of self-directed learning depicted in Figure 1 is not an isolated learning process, and learners should not be encouraged to work in isolation. Rather, it is a learning process in which a pedagogical space is created for learners to come together explicitly to engage with each other as active participants, arguably, dismantling the artificial value on being 'able' or 'normal' body and mind (Campbell 2009; McRuer 2006). In this regard, Garrison (1997) highlighted the point that self-directed learning within formal educational settings inevitably involves a process of *collaboration* between the learner, the educator, and other learners.

Figure 1 depicts this – showing how in the educational process there is *power-sharing* between learner, educator, and/or other learners in all three aspects of the learning process: planning, undertaking, and reviewing processes. The arrows in Figure 1 depict how learner(s) and teachers *all* have input in all aspects of learning. They share responsibility and control of directing the learning process. In this respect, Caffarella (1993) argued that, irrespective of the organising circumstances of the learning

environment, the self-directed learning process involves the learner assuming and maintaining 'primary responsibility' for directing their learning process. And, later in this paper we refer to the work of Grow (1991), which discusses how educational environments, over time, can become more self-directed. We acknowledge at this point that learners assuming and maintaining 'primary responsibility' over planning, undertaking, and reviewing aspects of learning should be a goal that can happen over time, perhaps months or years (Morris 2019a).

Moreover, we should also highlight the point that the literature on self-directed learning has identified that scholars' ideological views on the possibility for power-sharing (as exampled by the model presented in Figure 1 of the present paper) can conflict in practice with some educators' views on what it means to be a teacher and subject knowledge expert (e.g. Nasri 2019). But, power-sharing in terms of taking responsibility to control the direction of learning means and objectives is a key feature of realising in practice the pedagogical model presented in Figure 1.

It seems important to acknowledge that self-directed learning theory derived from studies on adult learning – and in the following section ('Inclusion through learning') we discuss competence in self-directed learning as fundamental for meeting the demands of a changing world. In this respect, a seminal empirical study in the adult learning literature from Tough (1971) with 66 Canadian adults identified that it was habitual for adults to undertake self-taught learning projects, defined as a 'major, highly deliberate effort to gain certain knowledge and skill (or to change in some other way)' (1). Learning projects represent proactive and purposeful learning, most of which are related to the person's job or occupation, or personal interests. As shown in Figure 1, an important part of the process is that the learner is involved in planning their objective for learning – that enables objectives to be *contextualised – within the learner's world*: respecting and appreciating the equal value of each learner's own personal history, context, and understanding of *our* world.

Moreover, Figure 1 represents a learning process that encourages learners to work together, help each other, and come to celebrate our individuality. In this respect, Gibbons et al. (1980) described how people who develop expertise via self-directed learning, rather than traditional learning forms, conduct their learning with and around others – where people have learned to value other people's expressions (cf. hooks 1994) across all three learning stages (cf. Figure 1). Gibbons and colleagues identified successful self-directed learning as a process in which: ideas are shared and discussed, where people work together to build on each other's expertise, ways of learning and being resourceful for learning, and then discuss and celebrate their new learning achievements *together*.

Moreover, the influential work of Carl Rogers (1969) offered six principles for facilitating self-directed learning in formal educational settings, following the discussion of informal notes kept by a primary school teacher, Barbara Shiel; who 'experimented' with a learning process where learners worked on their own topic through their preferential means, at their preferred level and pace, and went as far as they were able or self-motivated enough to go, with or without other learners. The six principles being: (1) the need to set an appropriate initial mood or climate for the experience; (2) enabling the collaborative setting of learning objectives; (3) providing access to the widest possible range of resources for learning, including themselves (the educator) as a valuable

resource; (4) welcoming all opinions and attitudes towards the content in an unbiased way; (5) a share of control of directing the objectives and means of learning between teacher and learner(s); and, (6) not imposing how students choose to construct meaning (Rogers 1969).

Here, learning projects were formally agreed upon between teacher and learner through a formal learning contract (refer to Knowles 1975, about learning contracts for self-directed learning). It was quite clear in the teacher's notes that Rogers cited that some students 'struggled' to progress more than others. Likewise, other early studies, also employing learning contracts to help to facilitate self-directed learning in formal education settings, such as that of Kasworm (1983, with Higher Education students) concluded some positive findings, but also that about a quarter of students had difficulty with the self-directed learning process. Notably, these studies commonly highlighted the point that some learners will need different amounts and types of support with self-directed learning. Studies have shown that some students will need a high level of personalised support, specialised learning resources, and a teacher who is competent to facilitate a self-directed learning environment (e.g. Jossberger et al. 2010; Morris and Rohs 2023; Nasri 2019). And, in respect of the model depicted in Figure 1, differential learner support will be inevitable across planning, undertaking, and reviewing aspects.

Empirical studies have also highlighted – as part of the support needed – the need for teaching learners the necessary skills for inquiry for successful self-directed learning, that learners will hold to various amounts (e.g. Kicken et al. 2009). Kicken and colleagues (2009) identify that it could *take some time* for a self-directed learning environment to be fruitful as learners may commonly be used to a teacher-directed learning environment, perhaps through their entire schooling years.

So, we should expect that implementation of *The Co-produced Pedagogic Spaces Model of Self-Directed Learning*, depicted in Figure 1, will take time and consideration in terms of planning its implementation. On this point, it is also important to consider that the competence of the education practitioner has a significant impact upon their inclusive practice, and therefore educator training to facilitate self-directed learning environments will likely be required (de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert 2011). But, theoretically, this educational model can work for every learner, and foster an inclusive learning environment (cf. UPIAS, 1975); that is welcoming for all children, whereby they can experience a sense of belonging, flourish, make friends, build communities, and celebrate their individuality, *together*.

Inclusion through learning

Equally importantly, the model (Figure 1) arguably can also target a fundamental learning outcome – in terms of achieving inclusion *through* education. We are referring back to the comments from John Dewey that the purpose of education must be to 'prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life' (Dewey [1938] 1963, 18). Through learners practicing a process in which they hold a share of power in planning, undertaking, and reviewing learning is essentially practicing *learning how to learn*.

More recently, self-directed learning has been positioned as a fundamental *meta-competence* for living and working in our increasingly complex, changing, and unpredictable

world: because it empowers a person to upskill – and be therefore adaptable to change (Morris and Rohs 2021; Morris and Rohs 2023). Hence, fostering competence for self-directed learning is often positioned as the most essential goal of education (e.g. Kranzow and Hyland 2016). Potential key benefits of self-directed learning competence include: providing the person a certain protection against long-term unemployment through providing the individual the ability to 'upskill' (cf. Barnes, Brown, and Warhurst 2016); avoidance of knowledge and skill obsolescence (e.g. Morrison and Premkumar 2014); empowering individuals with the ability to take emancipatory action if/when faced with oppressive situations (e.g. Bagnall and Hodge 2018); and, nurturing long-term career success (e.g. Seibert, Kraimer, and Crant 2001). Nonetheless, encouraging self-directed learning to be directed to others as well as self is proposed as a key principle of co-produced self-directed pedagogic spaces for inclusion.

A key principle – encouraging self-directed learning to be directed to others

Perhaps one of the most important principles of implementing a self-directed learning framework is that the outcomes of the learning process must *not only* be 'directed to self' (cf. Morris et al. 2024). This could nonetheless be an outcome e.g. fostering one's own reading skills. Rather, a teacher could assist in the planning of learning goals that are directed to understanding, helping, caring and loving for 'others', and part of this process may include fostering a critical consciousness in learners (Morris 2023). In a wider perspective, Morris (2023) argues that education can be a backdoor to peace. And, we shall say here that 'others' does not only have to refer to other humans, but it could also refer to our earth, or climate, animals, groups who face oppression, etcetera. In this regard, teachers should encourage learners to design learning objectives that are directed to others as a core aspect of the educational process (cf. Figure 1).

Conclusion – an all or nothing concept?

In this present paper we argue that inclusion must be the starting point in the design of education. We discuss the potential for *co-produced pedagogic spaces* to facilitate inclusion, and we use the theoretical framework of self-directed learning to identify that co-production can happen at all pedagogical phases – planning, undertaking, and reviewing phases of learning.

However, in the true spirit of co-production, our work is collaborative and open-ended rather than deontological. By this, we mean that we are not prescribing a particular set of practices, scheme of work, or framework to retroactively adapt a pre-determined curriculum (e.g. *Universal Design for Learning* Guidelines: CAST 2024). Instead, we call into question the purpose of education, and hope to inspire thinking that can draw students and staff together in a space of co-design that allows for the shared planning of goals and how they can be achieved. Whilst we recognise the importance of systems like Universal Design for Learning and the need for teachers to provide an array of inputs (multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression), our aim is to invite readers to consider the purposes of education and how they can be equitably developed. This is a relativist and situated process and cannot be detached from the needs of diverse children across different cultural contexts. We cannot create a single

approach that is universally valid for all learners across the world, but we can provide a discourse and theoretical tools for thinking about how educational purposes can be co-designed with learners, as agentic individuals with their own situated support needs and motivations.

To end this paper, we would like to ask that educational stakeholders do not discount the novel ideas presented in this present paper on the basis that they are not realistic (e.g. within given curricular, or educational policy context). Perhaps the ideas presented here could form part of an education course? And, could elements of, or the whole model depicted in Figure 1, be fitted to existing educational frameworks, or classroom practices? In this respect, Grow's (1991) staged model of self-directed learning discusses how, over time, educational environments can be set up that encourage and enable learning that is more self-directed. In respect of Figure 1, this would mean that the learner *over time* would be encouraged to take responsibility to take primary control of directing the planning, undertaking, and reviewing of learning. However, realisation of this in practice may depend on the educational contextual conditions, the learner(s) being a central part of the context, which may depend on factors such as learner personality characteristics, age, education needs, etcetera – and as the above empirical studies have identified – some students will need more support than others with the process.

It has been identified recently that a framework of self-directed learning may be found and fostered in the following educational activity forms: experiential learning; experimental-based learning; maker learning; task-based learning; interest-based learning; inquiry-based learning; problem-based learning; case-based learning; workplace simulations; and, (e-)portfolio based learning (Morris 2020; Morris and Rohs 2023). This is not an exhaustive list. A key commonality of the above learning forms is that learners solve or resolve authentic problems in real-world based contexts through an inquiry process – celebrating a constructivist epistemology, where learners practice being producers/creators, not just consumers of knowledge – placing a central emphasis on learning that is contextualised within the learner's world (cf. Figure 1; also, Morris and Rohs 2023).

When considering what learning forms should encompass an education, we should also consider that when a learning process is linked to *the* learners' world(s) that this should fuel a powerful intrinsic motivation for learning (Morris 2019b; Ryan and Deci 2017). On this point, Rigby and Ryan (2018) identify that 'volitional, high-quality motivation' is 'energized directly by … needs, values, and interest' (136), which is 'evident when one pursues goals and values that are *personally meaningful*' (137; emphasis in original).

In response to the all or nothing concept: clearly, some inclusion of self-directed learning and/or elements of power-sharing possibilities would (arguably) be better than none. And, some educational settings may be already operating some of the foundational pedagogical principles of *The Co-produced Pedagogic Spaces Model of Self-Directed Learning* presented in Figure 1 of this present paper. Regardless of past pedagogical practices, now is the time to embrace our differences and make it happen for all our children. We hope this novel work will spark debate, discussion, educational change, and further research on this topic.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr Thomas Howard Morris is a Senior Lecturer in Pedagogy and Educational Theory and is passionate about conducting research that focuses on understanding how pedagogy in formal education can be oppressive or emancipatory in terms of fostering competence in self-directed lifelong learning, which can afford a person the adaptability necessary to meet the challenges we face in our rapidly changing world.

Dr Ben Simmons is a Professor of Inclusive Education and Disability Research and has a longstanding research interest and expertise in working with people with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD).

Dr Sarah McLaughlin is a qualified teacher in post-compulsory education and higher academic practice. Her research areas include creative methods, education, social class, intersectionality and social justice.

Dr Stuart Read is a Reader in Disability Studies and Inclusion and has research interests and experience across the fields of disability studies and inclusion.

Dr Anne Parfitt undertakes research that focuses on learning in a range of non-conventional learning, specifically, learning for work. She is interested in the intersections between different forms of knowledge in relation to work.

Dr Chloe Shu-Hua Yeh is a Senior Lecturer in Education Studies (Research Methods). She has published multiple interdisciplinary research works, including on the topics of students' scientific thinking and conceptual processes, emotion and cognition (creativity and attentional breadth), academic acculturation, academic motivation, neuromyth, well-being and resilience.

Dr Bethan Mitchell has worked in the field of professional education and learning for over twenty years. Her research interests include actor-network theory in education contexts, and she is currently researching the notion of resilience from a sociomaterial perspective.

ORCID

Thomas Howard Morris http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0100-6434
Ben Simmons http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1432-7082
Sarah McLaughlin http://orcid.org/0009-0001-5174-6238
Chloe Shu-Hua Yeh http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8717-0568
Bethan Mitchell http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6025-7348

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