



# *Innovative Alternative Schools*

*Fear and Attraction for Heterogeneity in  
School Types*

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EXPLORING HETEROGENEITY IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS**

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# Some brief definitions

(from Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane, various sources)

- **Conventional education** – Generally founded on “educational paternalism.” The paternalism of conventional schooling is direct and autocratic: students expected to obey the teacher’s orders, comply with the rules that were instituted for them by the educational authorities, and work on the assignments they are charged with regardless of their own interests, needs, or opinions. Standard curriculum, teacher as authority, same-age grouping, grades, competition, publicly-funded, etc.
- **Innovative alternatives (specifically democratic free schools)** Founded on a philosophical approach in which the students, teachers, administrators, and other participants have equal rights and power of decision-making about almost all issues of school governance and personal educational matters. No set curriculum, adult as facilitator/guide on side, mixed-age grouping, self-evaluation, self-discovery, often privately-funded (though that is changing).

# My background

- Attended conventional public schools for K-12 in New York and Maryland. Attended conventional universities, majored in History and Sociology, Master's in History, later got Master's in education plus teacher's license.
- Taught 6 years in conventional schools (middle school).
- PhD at a conventional, public university in Curriculum and Instruction: Foundations of Education.
- Have been teaching in conventional teacher education programs at a public university for the past 20 years
- Research focus has been on innovative educational alternatives – specifically democratic free schools.
- Have been working to weave the two worlds together – the conventional with the innovative democratic free schools.



“Heterogeneity in an educational context promotes a more diverse, equitable and inclusive society and hence, should be encouraged and celebrated”

-(Speakers series theme statement)

- Does this apply to types of schools as well?

# *Background on heterogeneity of school types in US and Germany*

In both Germany and the US, education is a public responsibility regulated by the state/Bundesland, but federal regulations/court cases also have established the right for private schools to co-exist and be an alternative for families.

People of means in both countries have always been able to choose among schools (marketplace).

Depending on the state/Bundesland, private schools can receive public funds (called vouchers or neo-vouchers in US context; subsidies in German context). In the US, vouchers/neo-vouchers have become available in more and more states over the past 20+ years. This public funding then, (often with the context of neoliberalism and privatization of public services) has increased access to this marketplace for other social classes (in some cases, is just rhetorical access, as cultural capital is often needed in place of financial capital).



# *Attraction to Heterogeneity of School Types*

*Student criticisms of conventional schools  
that lead to attraction for alternatives*



# Criticisms of conventional schools, making something different attractive



Too much performance and competitive pressure; "I'm in it alone; I need to be better than you"

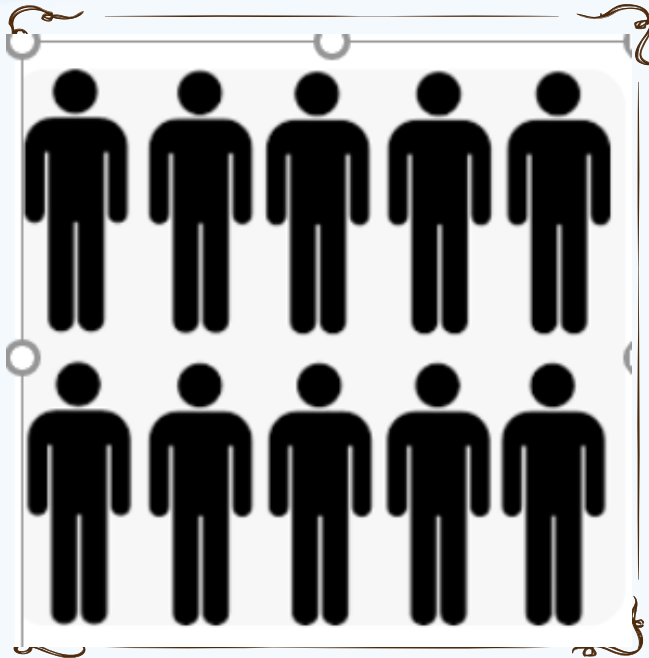


Limited opportunities for collaboration

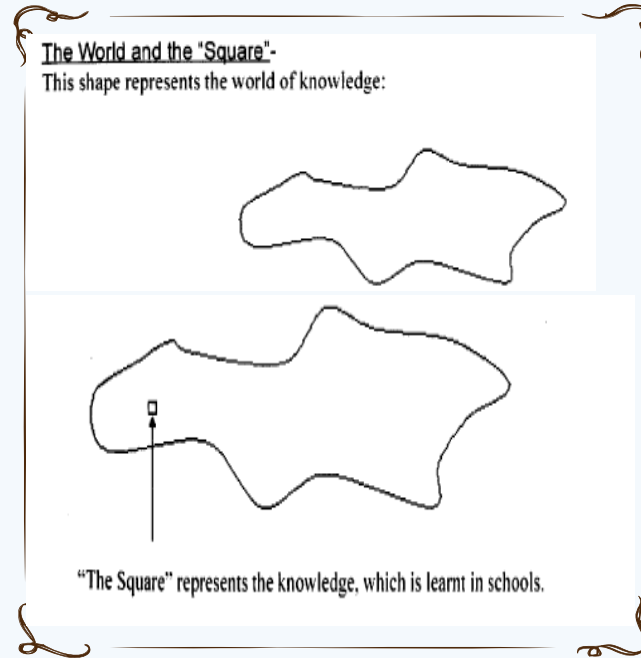


Emphasis on product over process.

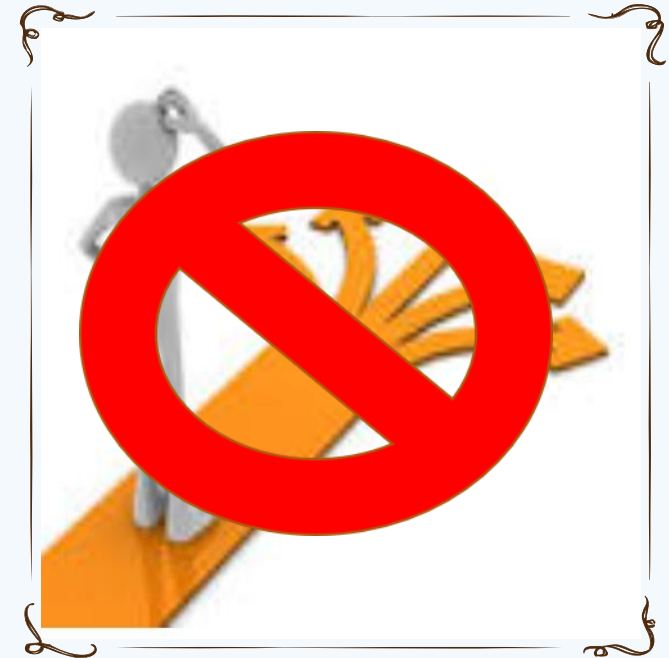
# Criticisms of conventional schools, making something different attractive



Limited diversity in peer group (age-grading, ability grouping)



Content is limited



Limited freedom of choice and ability to explore own interests within a given program; mandates and force are more the norm



# Criticisms of conventional schools, making something different attractive



Passive, rather than active, engagement



Lack of creativity



Not enough teachers, minimal time for individualizing instruction

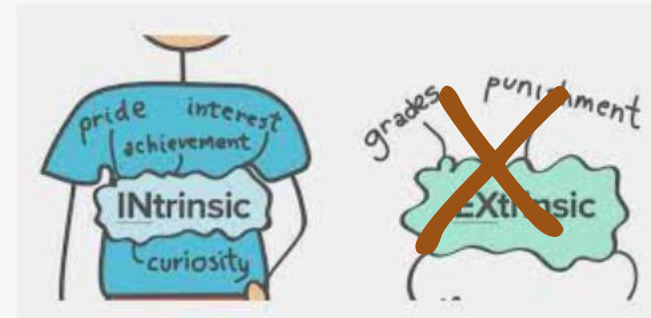


*What's Attractive about  
Different School Types  
(especially democratic free  
schools)*





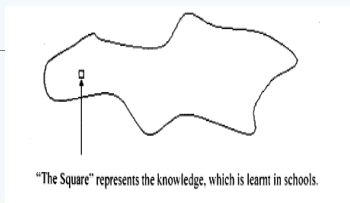
More social-emotional skills development



Learning motivated by interest and choice



Expansion of the learning environment and of what content, skills, and perspectives are valued (no more "squaricism")



"The Square" represents the knowledge, which is learnt in schools.

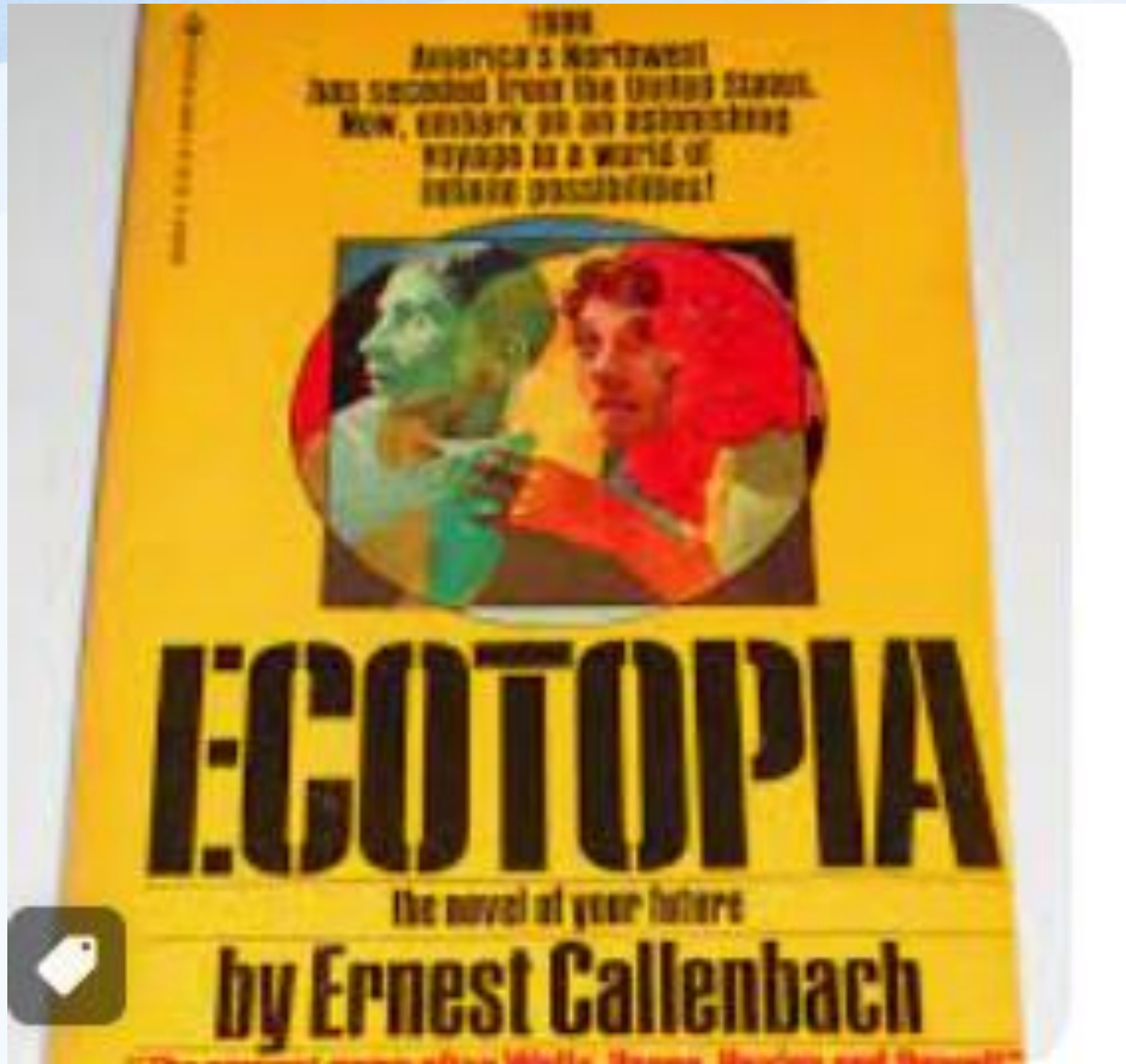


Less stress, more time to explore

PROCESS

PRODUCT





Student reactions?

Love it!!



# BREAKINGPOINT

The Education Cr

Some people think that today's curriculum in schools is too rigid, too formulaic to inspire kids to learn. Well, we got a glimpse inside

Student  
reactions?

*ACCCK –  
Run Away!!!*





# *Fear of Heterogeneity of School Types*

*Reactions to innovative schools – especially  
free schools*



# What are the fears?

- Are the children safe?
- Are they prepared for the next steps in life (job skills, academic content to get into university)? Won't kids just "do nothing"?
- Do the adults in the schools know what they are doing (teacher licensure, content mastery, etc.)? How do we know?
- Is public money spent "properly"?
- Are they being indoctrinated?
- Are the children segregated (by income, ideology, ethnicity, etc.)?

# Where do the fears come from?

- FOTU – fear of the unknown
- Own institutional histories
- Families
- Greater culture (capitalism, consumerism; money=happiness).
- TINA – There is No Alternative (lack of opportunity to envision alternatives)  
“People who believe TINA are unlikely to try to change things because such efforts seem futile. Once the premise is accepted that there is no alternative to current arrangements, no matter how imperfect they might be, then it’s ridiculous to look for what doesn’t or can’t exist. Anyone who believes that there ARE alternatives can be dismissed as “out of touch with reality” (Schwalbe, 2008, *Rigging the Game*)

*Heterogeneity in an educational context promotes a more diverse, equitable and inclusive society and hence, should be encouraged and celebrated”*

*-(Speakers series theme statement)*

*Let's Discuss!*

*How can we get to this point regarding school types?*

*Is it possible to view the value of heterogeneity of school types in the same way we have come to value it about human differences within a school?*

*How can I help diminish the fears so the attraction can lead to embracing more alternatives? (yet, at the same time, not completely invalidate a student's fears)*

*Your questions and ideas*