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Scaling Alternative Pedagogical Models into the Mainstream Educational System: Lessons from Slovakia

1. Introduction

The right to learning is firmly embedded in international human rights law. Yet in practice, this right is often interpreted narrowly: as access to a single, state-defined model of schooling. For example in Slovakia among approximately 2000 primary schools only 4 have alternative curricula. Such an interpretation reduces learning to institutional compliance and overlooks the diversity of learners, cultures, and social realities. In a rapidly changing world marked by technological disruption, global mobility, ecological crises, and democratic fragility, the limitations of uniform learning systems are increasingly evident.

The United Nations should actively promote freedom of learning models as a human-rights imperative. Freedom of learning models does not mean the absence of standards or accountability. Rather, it means legal, institutional, and cultural recognition that there are multiple legitimate ways to organize learning that can meet public goals while respecting learner agency, well-being, inclusion, and adaptability.

Democratic learning is used here as a representative example, not as an exclusive solution. It is particularly suitable because it explicitly centers learner agency, participation, and shared responsibility - principles already embedded in UN frameworks but rarely operationalized at the system level. Through comparative analysis, a detailed case study of Slovakia, and a transferable policy model, this essay demonstrates how controlled systems can allow pluralism without losing public oversight, and why such pluralism strengthens - not weakens - learning systems.

2. Why Diversity of Learning Models Matters

2.1 Learning systems are dealing with radically different learners

Uniform learning systems assume that learners are sufficiently similar in motivation, pace, interests, and developmental trajectories to justify standardized pathways. Decades of research contradict this assumption. Learners differ not only cognitively, but socially, emotionally, culturally, and neurologically. When a system allows only one dominant model, mismatch is inevitable. The result is disengagement, labeling, early school leaving, and long-term inequality.

Historical evidence highlights the consequences of rigid uniformity. In several European countries during the 19th and 20th centuries, strict centralized models enforced standardized content and pace, often marginalizing learners who did not conform to normative expectations. Modern studies corroborate this pattern. Learners in highly standardized environments report lower intrinsic motivation and engagement compared to peers in flexible, learner-centered models (OECD, 2020).

Diversity of learning models functions as a structural inclusion mechanism. Instead of forcing all learners to adapt to one model, the system adapts by allowing multiple forms of learning to coexist. This aligns with a rights-based understanding of inclusion: not assimilation into a norm, but recognition of difference as legitimate.

2.2 Learner agency is a proven driver of motivation and deep learning

Learner agency is central to this argument. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 identifies agency as a cornerstone of future-ready learning systems, highlighting the capacity of learners to set goals, make choices, and act responsibly in shaping their own trajectories (OECD, 2019). Empirical research supports this framework. Learners who experience agency exhibit higher intrinsic motivation, deeper engagement, and greater persistence, all of which are associated with improved long-term outcomes (Reeve, 2006). Democratic learning operationalizes agency not as a pedagogical add-on, but as a structural principle: students participate in decisions about learning content, pedagogical methods, and school governance. This systemic integration of agency enables learners to practice autonomy in a supportive environment, fostering resilience, self-efficacy, and a sense of responsibility. Such models have been shown to enhance both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, preparing learners not only to acquire knowledge but to navigate and influence the complex social world (Gray, 2013; OECD, 2019; Reeve, 2006).

2.3 Social and emotional outcomes matter as much as academic ones

Large-scale meta-analyses, including those by Hattie (2009), show that factors such as student-teacher relationships, self-reported grades, formative feedback, and metacognitive strategies have effect sizes comparable to or higher than many structural reforms. These factors are strongly present in learner-centered and democratic environments.

Systems that allow multiple learning models create space for environments where trust, belonging, and responsibility are cultivated intentionally. This has implications beyond individual well-being: social cohesion, democratic participation, and resilience are shaped through lived learning experiences, not through curriculum statements alone.

2.4 Equity and quality through pluralism

A key misconception is that centralized, monopoly systems guarantee quality and equity. Evidence shows that uniformity does not automatically lead to equitable outcomes. For example, Sahlberg (2015) notes that even in high-performing countries, rigid, top-down systems often reproduce social inequalities.

The variation in national approaches to learning models further underscores the importance of diversity. Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada, and the

United States, permit a wide spectrum of pedagogical approaches, including democratic, Montessori, Waldorf, and project-based models. In these systems, schools operate with autonomy over pedagogy, while accountability is measured through outcomes rather than adherence to rigid procedures. By contrast, countries such as Germany, Austria, and parts of Scandinavia maintain highly prescriptive systems, requiring adherence to national curricula and tightly regulated standards. While these restrictions are often justified on grounds of quality assurance and child protection, evidence indicates that monopolistic systems do not guarantee equity or superior outcomes. On the contrary, carefully regulated pluralism can improve both equity and quality by accommodating diverse learning needs and promoting innovation (Sahlberg, 2015; OECD, 2012).

In restrictive systems, introducing diversity can be accomplished through structured mechanisms such as pilot programs or experimental verification. Slovakia provides a compelling example of this approach, demonstrating that controlled pluralism can coexist with state oversight while maintaining accountability.

3. Case Study: How Democratic Learning Is Allowed in Slovakia

Slovakia provides a particularly relevant case study because it represents a highly centralized and controlled learning system that nevertheless contains a legal mechanism allowing alternative learning models to emerge.

3.1 Strong state control as a starting point

The Slovak learning system is characterized by:

- A national curriculum framework
- Centralized assessment expectations
- Strong regulatory oversight of schools
- Limited autonomy for learners within mainstream settings

In principle, this structure leaves little room for democratic or self-directed learning. However, Slovak law includes a crucial mechanism: experimental verification (pilot testing of alternative models).

3.2 Experimental verification as a legal pathway

Experimental verification allows schools to implement innovative approaches for a defined period under close supervision. Applicants must submit a detailed description of the learning model, outline expected outcomes, and specify evaluation and safety protocols. External evaluators and research institutions often collaborate with the school to collect evidence on academic achievement, learner well-being, social competencies, and the development of agency. This combination of structured innovation and rigorous evaluation ensures that experimental schools operate safely, inclusively, and effectively.

3.3 Democratic learning under experimental status

Democratic learning initiative in Slovakia operates under this framework. This school emphasizes voluntary participation, learner-governed decision-making, mixed-age learning environments, and mentorship-based teaching. Teachers serve as facilitators rather than authorities, and students play an active role in shaping both their learning and the rules of the

community. Research conducted during experimental periods documents learner development, well-being, and alignment with national learning outcomes. The goal is not exemption from public responsibility, but evidence-based validation of an alternative path.

3.4 Systemic outcome

If the pilot demonstrates that democratic learning is effective and safe, the Ministry of Education may grant official recognition, allowing broader adoption in public and private schools. This carefully regulated approach balances state responsibility with pedagogical freedom, demonstrating that pluralism can flourish even in highly controlled systems. This approach shows that even controlled systems can allow diversity without abandoning public accountability.

4. A Transferable Model for Other Countries

The Slovak model provides a roadmap for other countries seeking to introduce diverse learning approaches, including democratic learning, within regulated frameworks. The first step is the legal recognition of pluralism, acknowledging that multiple pedagogical approaches can legitimately fulfill learning objectives. This principle shifts the focus from procedural uniformity to outcome-based accountability.

Countries can then implement pilot programs with time-limited approval, coupled with clear evaluation criteria. Independent research and data collection should monitor academic achievement, social-emotional development, learner agency, and safeguarding. By focusing on outcomes rather than prescribed methods, countries can evaluate effectiveness without constraining creativity or innovation.

Harmonization can be achieved through mutual recognition of competencies and flexible pathways for learner mobility, particularly relevant for globalized contexts where families may relocate across regions or countries. Importantly, the inclusion of democratic learning as a pilot serves as a stress test: if a system can safely accommodate full learner agency and shared governance, it can likely integrate other alternative models with similar principles.

Teacher training and professional development are central to success. Facilitators in democratic settings require skills in mentorship, conflict mediation, and portfolio-based assessment, emphasizing relational and cognitive scaffolding over direct instruction. Continuous professional learning ensures that staff can support self-directed learners while maintaining alignment with national standards and safeguarding requirements.

5. Conclusion: Why Diversity of Learning Models Is Beneficial

Diversity of learning models is not a threat to public learning systems. It is a strengthening mechanism. Systems that allow pluralism are more resilient, more inclusive, and better aligned with human rights. Monopoly models, while administratively simpler, cannot guarantee equity or quality, and often stifle innovation.

The Slovak case demonstrates that even highly centralized systems can integrate innovative approaches safely and effectively. Through experimental verification, democratic learning can be rigorously assessed, outcomes measured against national standards, and successful models scaled to benefit larger populations. This pathway illustrates that freedom of learning models does not imply chaos or lack of accountability; rather, it strengthens systems by fostering innovation, supporting inclusion, and preparing learners to navigate a complex, rapidly changing world.

On a global scale, the United Nations has a unique and urgent role to play. By advocating for legal frameworks that recognize multiple legitimate pathways of learning, supporting pilot initiatives, and promoting research-informed policy, the UN can help transform learning from a uniform, compliance-driven process into a dynamic, human-centered ecosystem. Such advocacy would not only protect the rights of learners but also equip societies with the skills, creativity, and resilience necessary to confront global challenges—from climate change to democratic governance.

Diversity in learning models is therefore a matter of justice, quality, and sustainability. It fosters equity by accommodating diverse needs, strengthens learning outcomes through learner agency and engagement, and enhances social cohesion by teaching collaborative, participatory skills. By championing the freedom to innovate within learning systems, the United Nations can ensure that the right to learning is not merely access to schooling, but access to meaningful, empowering, and life-shaping experiences. In doing so, the UN would affirm that every learner has not only the right to learn but the right to learn in ways that are relevant, dignified, and transformative, paving the way for a more just, adaptable, and enlightened global society.

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