

Name of the country/entity submitting information	Private Elementary School of Democratic Education, Galaktická 9, Košice, Slovakia
Contact details (will be deleted from the published form)	Juraj Mazák info@slobodnaskola.sk slobodnaskola.sk +421 948 223 247

Self-directed education as a necessary prerequisite for inclusion in educational systems.

1. Introduction: Why Individualized Curricula Matter

Education is a human right. Every child deserves to learn in a way that respects who they are, what they care about, and what they are capable of becoming. Yet, most schools still rely on rigid, nation-wide standardized programs that treat children like identical parts in a machine. These curricula ignore their individuality, suppress their voices, and too often fail to meet even the most basic rights of children - those with various specific or less usual characteristics. Children do not diverge only by measurable indicators or diagnostic labels. Many simply stand out in subtler ways: they are more curious, more stubborn, more cautious, less articulate, unusually imaginative, or deeply reflective. They do not fit neatly into the logic of the system - not because something is wrong with them, but because the system was not designed for real human diversity. Education that does not recognize the child as a person and personality is not education at all; it is control, conformity, and missed potential.

Self-directed education (SDE) is not a luxury - it is a necessary foundation for real inclusion. Only when children can make choices about what and how they learn can schools respond to differences, protect minority rights, and ensure that no child is left behind. Individualized curricula give each child the space to grow, explore, and develop their strengths, while respecting their family, culture, and identity. Inclusion is meaningless without this freedom: you cannot include a child fully if the system forces them into one path. SDE turns education into a process that empowers, rather than confines, and makes it possible for all children to learn, thrive, and contribute to a society that values diversity and human potential.

2. Human Rights Argument – Inclusion and Minority Rights

Children are unique individuals, not uniform members of a classroom. Their interests, abilities, and needs differ far more than adults'. Standardized curricula, even when labeled "inclusive," often focus on group averages or external categories - such as socio-economic disadvantage - while ignoring the individuality of each child. Human rights exist first and foremost for the individual; only then can they inform the rights of groups. Group rights are derived from the rights of the individuals who compose the group, not the other way around. Inclusion cannot be meaningful if it treats children as interchangeable parts of a system; true inclusion requires that each child's rights, identity, and potential are recognized and nurtured. Human rights, including language, culture, disability or talent and identity, belong to

individual children and must be embedded into curricula that respond to the child, not the classroom.

In standardized educational settings, even slight deviations from expected behavior or learning pace are often treated as problems to be corrected rather than expressions of individuality to be understood. Such children are quickly labeled, redirected, or reshaped to fit predefined norms, long before their potential is allowed to emerge. Self-directed, individualized pedagogy creates space for these differences to exist without punishment or pathologization, ensuring that inclusion extends beyond formally recognized categories and protects the dignity and rights of every child, including those who simply learn, feel, or express themselves differently.

Research and practice consistently show that when learners have control over what and how they learn, they are more engaged, motivated, and confident in their identity. Self-directed learning not only supports academic outcomes but also fosters social and emotional development, providing a framework for inclusion *both in* education - through pedagogical strategies - and *through* education - by promoting equity and social justice (Morris, Koutsouris, Stentiford, & Bremner, 2025). Studies of individualized learning demonstrate that tailoring education to students' interests and abilities enhances problem-solving skills, self-regulation, and higher-order thinking (Arvidsson & Kuhn, 2021). In contrast, rigid, standardized curricula impose uniform expectations that often silence children whose identities, abilities, or interests do not conform to the average, reducing meaningful participation and limiting the development of personal potential. What is more, being forbidden to think and act autonomously, being coerced especially at a young age was repeatedly linked as a cause of learned helplessness which is closely linked to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Dweck, 1975; DeCharms, 1976; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Developmental research further shows that early recognition of individuality - through autonomy-supportive learning and self-regulation - improves cognitive outcomes, social engagement, and psychological well-being (Cronin-Golomb & Bauer, 2023). Together, this evidence demonstrates that individualized, self-directed curricula are not only ethically aligned with human rights principles but are also practically effective in fostering inclusion, engagement, and holistic development and support wellbeing and mental health.

Individualized, self-directed curricula transform inclusion from a symbolic principle into a lived reality. Children grow according to their unique strengths and interests, individual identities and individual limitations are respected, and parents' rights to guide their child's education are honored. Societies benefit when diversity is protected at the individual level, because empowered individuals contribute to more equitable, resilient, and adaptive communities. Without self-directed learning, education systems risk violating human rights, the development of socio-pathological phenomena and mental disorders, perpetuating marginalization, and undermining both social cohesion and individual flourishing. In short, self-directed education is not optional - it is the necessary foundation for human-rights-respecting education, ensuring that every child is both seen and heard.

3. Socio-Economic Argument – Investing in Individualized Education

Individualized, self-directed education is a wise socio-economic investment because supporting each child's unique development early saves enormous costs later and maximizes societal benefit. Investing in personalized education during childhood and adolescence - when development is most malleable - ensures that each child reaches their potential. Most of the resources required to support human development occur in these formative years; neglecting individual needs forces society to pay much higher costs later, through healthcare, social services, or lost productivity. In contrast, the cost of tailoring curricula today, particularly with AI-supported tools, is minimal relative to the lifelong value of a fully developed individual.

Research in educational psychology shows that when learners manage their own goals and monitor their progress, they experience higher intrinsic motivation, greater self-efficacy, and increased confidence in their learning capacities - factors closely linked to long-term success and lifelong learning skills. (Robinson, J. D., & Persky, A. M., 2020). These skills are not only academic but life skills - critical thinking, initiative, problem solving, and self-management - that conventional curricula rarely prioritize but are essential for thriving in complex social and economic landscapes.

Individualized, self-directed education is a sound socio-economic investment because supporting each child's development early significantly reduces public costs later in life while increasing overall societal benefit. Research from longitudinal early education studies consistently shows that investments made during childhood—when cognitive, social, and emotional development is most malleable—generate high long-term returns through higher educational attainment, increased lifetime earnings, better health outcomes, and reduced reliance on social services and criminal justice systems (Heckman, 2011; Heckman et al., 2017). Meta-analyses of early childhood and learner-centered interventions demonstrate returns ranging from three to over ten dollars for every dollar invested, largely due to improved self-regulation, motivation, and adaptive skills developed early in life (Campbell et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2011). Conversely, education systems that fail to respond to individual needs often shift costs into adulthood, where remediation, unemployment, healthcare, and social exclusion become far more expensive to address.

Modern technology now amplifies this potential. A systematic review of AI-based personalized learning finds that AI tools can tailor educational pathways, provide dynamic feedback, and adapt about content, pacing, and support to individual learners' needs, improving knowledge acquisition, engagement, and satisfaction across primary, secondary, and higher learning contexts (Farhood et al., 2025). These AI-enabled systems make individualized, self-directed pathways more scalable and cost-effective, suggesting that personalized learning supported by AI can enhance educational reach and depth beyond traditional methods. Collectively, this evidence supports that SDE and AI-supported personalization are not only pedagogically sound but socio-economically beneficial for developing human potential at scale.

Self-directed, individualized education is not only economically wise - it is a human-rights imperative that shapes children's life chances and promotes meaningful inclusion. Children

who are trusted to explore their interests, make choices, and learn at their own pace develop agency, confidence, and the capacity to learn throughout life. This directly affects their future participation in society - as workers, citizens, parents, and creators. Systems that suppress individuality in childhood often pay later through disengagement, unemployment, mental-health costs, and social exclusion. By contrast, SDE helps children reach their potential early, when investment has the highest return. With AI making personalization increasingly affordable, continuing to rely on rigid, standardized curricula is no longer a matter of limited capacity, but of policy choice. Failing to individualize education today means knowingly wasting human potential tomorrow - undermining social cohesion, economic resilience, and the realization of human rights.

4. Globalization Argument – Preparing Children for a Diverse, Rapidly Changing World

In today's interconnected societies, families move across cities, countries, and continents. Children who are part of the majority in one context may become a minority in another. Standardized curricula often prioritize the interests of the majority or the country in which the school is located, overlooking the rights, identities, and cultural needs of individual learners. SDE ensures that each child's language, culture, and identity are respected and nurtured, regardless of shifting contexts.

By fostering autonomy, exploration, and critical thinking, SDE equips learners to navigate multicultural environments, interact respectfully with diverse peers, and respond effectively to rapidly changing labor markets and societal demands. Standardized curricula focus on uniform knowledge and predefined skills, often neglecting the capacities children need to navigate uncertainty, diversity, and cross-cultural interaction. Self-directed education, in contrast, encourages children to explore their own interests, confront challenges, and develop critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. By exposing children to diverse perspectives and experiences - not sterilized, "safe" content - SDE nurtures flexibility, creativity, and cultural competence, essential for functioning in global contexts.

Research on democratic and self-directed learning demonstrates that learners who manage their own goals and pathways develop autonomy, initiative, and problem-solving skills, which are highly transferable across contexts and cultures (Gray, 2017). Children in SDE environments also engage in collaborative and cross-age learning, exploring real-world problems that require negotiation, empathy, and adaptation - skills critical for global citizenship. Exposure to diverse peers, projects, and interests in SDE settings strengthens tolerance, perspective-taking, and social participation. Children in SDE environments also show higher empathy and tolerance, learning to engage with difference and situational minority experiences confidently.

When curricula protect individual rights, such as language and culture, children can move between countries or social contexts without losing their identity or being marginalized. This approach naturally supports inclusion across situational and cultural contexts: children who may be a minority in one setting can fully participate without having to conform to

majority-focused standards. Exposure to diverse peers, perspectives, and real-life challenges fosters tolerance, empathy, and collaboration, enabling learners to engage respectfully across differences. Inclusion and global adaptability are therefore mutually reinforcing: SDE creates environments where every learner's rights are respected, their potential is nurtured, and diversity is experienced as a resource rather than a barrier.

5. Pedagogical Argument – Centering the Child and Real-Life Diversity

Pedagogy must center the individual child, respect family values, and expose learners to the real diversity of life to be truly effective and inclusive. Traditional education often measures children first - through tests, rankings, or predetermined milestones - before allowing them to explore their interests. This approach risks labeling, marginalizing, or excluding children whose strengths, identities, or backgrounds do not fit the system's averages. What is more, we tend to measure only what is easily quantitatively measurable and we do not assign adequate value to many skills that are important for life just by not testing it labeling it as less important or not important at all.

In contrast, self-directed, individualized pedagogy prioritizes giving children time and space to discover their abilities, passions, and ways of learning. Assessment comes *after* exploration, supporting growth rather than constraining it. This approach recognizes each child as a unique individual, ensures that their voice is heard, and fosters genuine participation in their learning process.

It is important to recognize that children do not all develop in the same way, and it is entirely normal for many to learn, express themselves, or engage with the world differently. In the UK, research from the Education Policy Institute found that around 37% of children who started school were recorded as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) at some point between ages 5 and 16, meaning that on average nearly four in ten children had experienced a SEND identification over the course of their schooling (EPI 2025). Educational systems fail to accommodate natural diversity. Schools that prioritize conformity and uniform progression frequently interpret individuality - whether curiosity, caution, imagination, or unusual learning rhythms - as a deficit to be corrected rather than a difference to be nurtured. Self-directed, individualized education allows these variations to be seen as normal and valuable, ensuring that all children, including those who do not fit conventional norms, can develop their potential, participate fully, and have their rights respected.

Children are not blank slates; they develop within families, communities, and shifting social contexts. Standardized, rigid curricula often ignore these realities, treating all students as uniform and imposing knowledge and values disconnected from their lived experiences. Self-directed education, however, allows learning to be guided by each child's interests, strengths, and family values while maintaining broad educational goals. By integrating families as partners and giving children agency, pedagogy becomes responsive, inclusive, and grounded in real-world relevance.

Exposure to genuine diversity - different ages, perspectives, cultures, and abilities - prepares children to navigate complex social landscapes. This approach also strengthens social inclusion: children from minority or diverse backgrounds are evaluated based on their actual growth and capabilities, not forced conformity to standardized norms.

By focusing on growth rather than measurement, self-directed education creates inclusive spaces where every learner is valued, heard, and supported. It nurtures autonomy, resilience, and confidence, equipping children to thrive academically, socially, and culturally. Pedagogy thus becomes a tool for inclusion, equity, and the full realization of children's rights, while safeguarding their life chances and human dignity.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The United Nations should recognize self-directed, individualized learning as a core human-rights standard. It is essential for realizing the rights of every child, ensuring that each learner's identity, language, culture, and potential are respected and nurtured. Education that ignores individuality is a violation of children's rights, suppresses their voices, and limits both personal and societal development.

However, current curriculum decision-making processes often exclude the very subjects of education - children themselves. Even the formulation of questions in the UN's own call for inputs illustrates this common perception: key actors are understood as policymakers, ministries, curriculum specialists, teachers, and occasionally the private sector, while students' voices are not mentioned at all. Children are not recognised as the subjects of their own learning. Without intentional inclusion of children as active participants, curricula risk reflecting majority norms, political agendas, or commercial interests rather than the rights and needs of each learner.

The benefits of SDE extend far beyond the classroom. Societies gain when children's diversity and individual potential are cultivated: inclusive, empowered learners become creative, resilient, and socially responsible citizens, strengthening social cohesion, equity, and innovation.

The UN should call on member states to:

1. Legally and politically mandate individualized, self-directed curricula that place children at the center of learning.
2. Enable schools to adapt programs to each child, incorporating family guidance, specific characteristics, disabilities and talents, cultural identity, and diverse experiences and not only on students' documentation.
3. Promote international standards recognizing SDE as a human-rights-based approach, ensuring inclusion, equity, and protection of minority and individual rights worldwide.
4. Support the integration of technology, including AI, to make personalized, inclusive learning scalable and effective.

The UN has the authority and responsibility to ensure that education globally is not a system of conformity, but a platform for empowerment. By endorsing SDE, it can guarantee that every child's rights are upheld, every potential is realized, and education truly becomes a tool for human flourishing and global equity.

References

- Arvidsson, T. S., & Kuhn, D. (2021). Realizing the full potential of individualizing learning. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 65, 101960. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2021.101960>
- Campbell, F. A., Conti, G., Heckman, J. J., Moon, S. H., Pinto, R., Pungello, E., & Pan, Y. (2014). *Early childhood investments substantially boost adult health*. *Science*, 343(6178), 1478–1485. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1248429>
- Cronin-Golomb, L. M., & Bauer, P. J. (2023). *Self-motivated and directed learning across the lifespan*. *Acta Psychologica*, 232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103816>
- Education Policy Institute. (2025). *Identifying pupils with special educational needs and disabilities* (EPI report). EPI. <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/SEND-Final-Report-version-FINAL-04.02.2024-2.pdf>
- Farhood, H., Nyden, M., Beheshti, A., et al. (2025). Artificial intelligence-based personalised learning in education: A systematic literature review. *Discover Artificial Intelligence*, 5, 331. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44163-025-00598-x>
- Gray, Peter. (2017). Self-Directed Education - Unschooling and Democratic Schooling. [DOI:10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.80](https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.80).
- Dweck, C. S. (1975). *The role of expectations and attributions in the alleviation of learned helplessness*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31(4), 674–685.
- DeCharms, R. (1976). *Enhancing motivation: Change in the classroom*. Irvington.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions*. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54–67
- Heckman, J. J., Pinto, R., & Savelyev, P. A. (2013). *Understanding the mechanisms through which an influential early childhood program boosted adult outcomes*. *American Economic Review*, 103(6), 2052–2086. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.103.6.2052>
- Morris, T. H., Koutsouris, G., Stentiford, L., & Bremner, N. (2025). *Self-directed learning - a framework for inclusion 'in' and 'through' education – a systematic review*. *Review of Education*, 13, e70028. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.70028>
- Reynolds, A. J., Temple, J. A., White, B. A. B., Ou, S. R., & Robertson, D. L. (2011). *Age 26 cost–benefit analysis of the Child-Parent Center early education program*. *Child Development*, 82(1), 379–404. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01563.x>
- Robinson, J. D., & Persky, A. M. (2020). Developing Self-Directed Learners. *American journal of pharmaceutical education*, 84(3), 847512. <https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe847512>