

Of the everyday and play in improper education

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Abstract

This article explores the role of the everyday and play in alternative school practices. I propose the concept of a democratic 'common school' as one based on mundane daily experiences and different ways of knowing. The everyday and play are usually seen as complementary tools in pedagogical practices, rather than active cultural agents in cultivating the subjectivities of school participants. I propose exploring the everyday and play in alternative education practices as a contribution to the discourse of alternative pedagogies. This article is based on my observations and reflections from participating in the *School of Improper Education* (SoIE) initiated by KUNCI Study Forum & Collective. The article proposes that the everyday and play are not only tools in SoIE's day-to-day operations, but also ways of learning that enable participants to question knowledge hierarchies and to develop self-determined and emancipatory ways of knowing.

Keywords

everyday, play, alternative school, equality of knowledges

I.

Looking back at the educational model inherited from the Dutch colonial era to today's private/public school system in Indonesia, the logic remains the same: teaching is a step-by-step process of transferring knowledge to emancipate and advance the younger generation. However, this logic exists in the shadows of power relations enforced through hierarchies of knowledge, specifically — who knows, who has the 'right' to know, and who is deemed to be 'ignorant'. This teaching and learning style is enforced through cultures of measurement. These cultures of education determine what can be counted and credited as learning, what kinds of knowledge is valuable, and what kind of behaviour is desirable (i.e. more compatible with the values of a neoliberal capitalist society). In short, this model of education tends to ignore the value of what already exists in everyday life.

As a response to formal education under Managerialism¹ and its authoritative spectre, alternative, and experimental education frameworks have emerged to uphold the practice of a democratic 'common school'. As a practice, I suggest that a common school is a school for all people in the local area, that it is age-integrated, focused on a depth of learning, and based on collaboration. The common school is a public space for all citizens, a collective workshop of many purposes and possibilities, that works closely with other schools and practices, including the arts. Many communities and artists are thinking and experimenting with this practice in various parts of the world. In this article, I explore the questions: how can we create a democratic common school and what are the most basic shared experiences that make it possible? To do so I focus on two things that I think make a democratic common school possible: the everyday and play. Both the everyday and play relate to my experience as a participant at the School of Improper Education (SoIE) — a long-term collective learning process and study group initiated by KUNCI Study Forum & Collective in Yogyakarta, Indonesia (KUNCI, 2020). As an approach to education, the everyday opens a portal for exploring ways of learning not determined by education models designed from 'above'. Instead, the everyday might be understood as a kind of rhetoric of learning from 'below'. By 'below' I mean using common shared experiences — such as the everyday and play — to value and define what we should be learning according to the actual needs of the community.

Play makes the school a playground — a sort of tactic related to the everyday that enables ways of learning suitable for the individual community's needs. What is essential in developing a 'common' approach and school is that it offers possibilities of 'sensing together'. This means that the community can build connections between different experiences, and potentially contribute to projects of reimagining education. Therefore, I propose that the everyday and play are useful concepts to understand how a common school might emerge as a pedagogical experience. In this article I ask: What kind of tools can be generated from elements of shared experiences like our senses and emotions? And what kind of knowledge are we producing? To what extent can these tools be productive in cultivating our subjectivity as participants?

Over the last ten years, the SoIE has explored study practices from the past. The school has, and continues to experiment with four pedagogical practices. First, the Jacotot method, which was reimagined in Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987/1991). Jacotot's emancipatory experiment — now known as the Jacotot method — arose from his experience teaching French literature to Flemish-speaking students when he, himself, did not know the language, and his students did not know French. Without any knowledge of the French language, Jacotot instructed the class to read a bilingual French- Flemish edition of *Les Aventures de Télémaque*. From this experiment he deduced that teaching does not necessarily involve prior knowledge of the teacher.

Through this method the SoIE propose a flat learning environment where students and teachers start from a place of not knowing.

The second pedagogical practice used by the SoIE is the Turba Method, an approach to art, research, and activism formulated by The Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat or LEKRA (meaning the Institute of People's Culture) in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s. Turba which is an acronym for *turun ke bawah* literally means 'going below' but is contextually understood as learning from the grassroots (communities). Artists who use the Turba method try to get as close as possible to the knowledge and conditions of the people as a way of generating art and social change in the community. This is mainly practised through infield research, immersion, and participant observation. In the case of LEKRA, Turba became a form of political engagement with grassroots communities.

The third pedagogic method used by the SoIE is *nyantrik*, a learning practice that developed from pesantren (an Islamic boarding school) that is commonly used in the traditional performing arts community. *Nyantrik* is a method of artistic pedagogy, involving embodied learning relationships between masters (*empu*) and disciples. This learning process is focused on gaining knowledge based on the students' ability to become more sensitive to their environment. In general, *nyantrik* is aligned with the word *meguru* (studying with someone recognised as a *guru* or master) gaining knowledge, and serving the master. In essence, it is more than just learning, but also understanding the depths, not only of knowledge, but also how that knowledge is applied. The education process is experienced by living together in the community or where the master lives. Knowledge is not just given; but gained through the students' readiness to witness, imitate, and receive the essence of wisdom from the master.

The fourth pedagogic model is the Taman Siswa. Drawn from Soewardi Soeryaningrat's teaching principles, it was formulated in 1922 in an effort to counter the hegemony of Dutch colonial education (KUNCI, 2020). As a learning process, Taman Siswa focuses on educational principles developed by Soewardi Soeryaningrat (also known as Ki Hadjar Dewantara) that are rooted in the culture of the child. One of the main educational principles in Taman Siswa is a belief that the child's household is an important pedagogic space for nurturing and encouraging the development of students. The school as a familial unit has derived from the traditional Indonesian institution, the *pondok*—a form of religious boarding school where students gather around a master for religious instruction and work in the community. Although based in traditional culture, Taman Siswa is not entirely anticolonial. The educational principles of Taman Siswa are aimed at the preservation of traditional values while encouraging progress and adaptability. While continuity with the past, and maintaining individuality and uniqueness are important, so are the ever-expanding relationships between oneself, one's culture, and the wider world (Radcliffe, 1971). The experiment of the SoIE connects these rich and diverse educational approaches from the past and present to offer direction for the future.

In this essay I will not explicitly discuss these four learning processes but instead focus on how they incorporate and create value around everyday activities. Previous articles about the SoIE have focused on how these experiments have been practiced (Thajib, 2017; Chen, 2017; Ying Xin, 2018; KUNCI, 2020). In the next part of this essay, I propose that when moments of play are incorporated into learning, different senses are activated which can improve learning and understanding. I will explain this further through our Taman Siswa learning process.²

II.

Informal schools are possible because they exist within daily activities and become a part of everyday life. Informal schools and everyday life share many of the same features. What they share is that they are *common* and *ongoing*. The everyday is common, meaning it is accessible and widely experienced or practised, rather than individual or secret. A school becomes a common school when participants talk to each other and make decisions about: the topic(s) to be studied, the rules to be followed, and their collective learning goals. In contrast, a ceremonial festival that simply showcases student performances is not a *common* school. Apart from relying on larger institutions for funding and planning, ceremonial festivals are usually only enjoyed by select student representatives and guests who are invited to witness and officiate the events.

The everyday is not just the equivalent of something vernacular. The most common characteristic of the everyday is concerned with ongoing daily routines rather than one-off events or projects. The activities of cleaning, doing nothing, cooking, enjoying the house, and even watching a movie are everyday activities that are repeated regularly. These everyday activities are characterised by low effort, minimal planning, and contingency. More episodic events such as art exhibitions in a house or gallery are held only once or twice a year. The reason for this is that episodic activities require complex planning and decision making in service of a single event, rather than putting this energy into living better in the everyday. Formal education and events such as student and ceremonial festivals share this same characteristic.

In the SoIE, the everyday labour of cooking shares the following two features: it is easily accessible and practical, and a way of distributing labour and encouraging sharing. But cooking is not only the practice of expertise or the skill of preparing food by combining, mixing, and heating ingredients. It also involves exchanging recipes and methods and improvising to create new and unexpected dishes. In the SoIE, cooking is used as a tool to start class, although it can happen in the middle or end of the meeting. In our study report book — a shared document reflecting on our experiences in the SoIE — we include cooking as one of the main tools for running the school.

Cooking Together

How to use: Determine who will be responsible for grocery shopping and cooking. The menu is determined by the member who cooks. The cook must estimate the time this takes so that the class will begin on time.

Purpose: Strengthening relationships between members outside the classroom.

Reflection: It is necessary to pay attention to the dietary requirements and preferences of other members of the school such as allergies or intolerances or provide vegetarian choices. In the end, the cooking process is only done four or five times because of the limited time and energy used up if we cook before the meeting (Translated from Sekolah Salah Didik Uji Coba I, KUNCI Publication, 2019, p. 216).

Cooking together is one example of the SoIE's educational tools and instruments. For us in the SoIE, a tool refers to the things created collectively to support learning practices and everyday life. This tool is used before, during, and after class. It is not necessarily an inanimate object such as a blackboard; it can also be a living object, an action, a situation, or an idea or feeling. Cooking activities in the SoIE carry some of these immeasurable dimensions. The cooking experience cultivates participants' tastes and sensitivities while they chat here and there blurring the line between study and everyday life.



Figure 1. "Diam" (Doing nothing) and "Kopi dan yang membuatnya" (Coffee and who made it). School of Improper Education tools with a description of how to use them, what their purpose is, and our reflections on them. Image courtesy of The School of Improper Education.

Cooking at the school also enables new skills, affects, and interactions to emerge as some of the members don't have a cooking routine at home. Our sense memory recognises tastes, smells, and colours from our shared cooking activities. For example, an inherited family recipe shared by a friend is enough to evoke collective knowledge and experience that, by cooking together, we all inherit in some way. In another example, I cooked and shared my grandmother's chicken recipe for *Inkung*³ with members of the school. The multigenerational recipe was handed down from my grandmother to my mother and then my mother to me. Even though it didn't turn out as expected and didn't taste anything like the recipe, it was an intriguing experience.

During the cooking activities, I not only learned about the joy of eating delicate food but also about how to manipulate raw materials and arrange, combine, modify, and create new dishes. Through the SoIE, I have learned the quiet joy of hospitality, where someone prepares food for others in a way that is akin to making a song playlist at a party. Here hands move delicately to clean potatoes, fingers cut chicken meat, and the whole body is taken over by working rhythms that float between new ideas and memories. Over time, I began to grasp the fact that this action was not just regular cooking, but a sensorial form of learning.

The everyday plays a role in creating actions outside the systems that govern our lives. Indeed, daily life is lived in a system that is not our own — that of late capitalism. These values are pervasive in formal education in Indonesia, with much attention given to efficiency and rationality. Cooking is one way we resist this rationality in our daily lives, although we rarely consider this process a serious act of resistance.

I will now reflect on how we can resist the blueprint and design of dominant education that governs how we speak, dress, and spend our time. I will do this through a close reading of Michel de Certeau's (2002) famous essay *Walking in the City*. When viewed from above, we see that urban spaces are arranged in ways that regulate human movement and activity. When we stand at the top

of a tall building, we see the city from a new perspective. Such a perspective provides an overview of the urban design of roads and sidewalks that divide and dictate movement. However, the poetic of walking the city is determined by the fact that it is *not visible* or tangible from above.

de Certeau proposes that the god's view (i.e. 'looking down like a god') provides a "pleasure of seeing the whole" — what he also calls "the fiction of knowledge" (2002, p. 92). From this viewpoint, the complexity of the city becomes 'readable' as if it can be controlled. But the knowledge that is acquired by looking from above is an illusion. When we experience the city from the perspective of a pedestrian, we realise that despite the layout, walking provides an entirely different perspective and experience. What is not captured by the god's eye view of the city is what de Certeau calls the "rhetoric of walking" (p. 99). It is here that people are free to choose their own rhythm and pathway — one that is not predetermined by design.

I now want to extend de Certeau's ideas about urban design to the domain of education. In formal educational practices in much of the world, curricula, tools, and manuals shape knowledge practices. But there are also many instances where teacher-student experiments try to invent their own ways of learning. And while the school curriculum provides the 'repertoire' of learning, people use different styles to enact it. Following de Certeau, I call this the 'rhetoric of learning'. Here, there are moments where power finds its limits, and this creates opportunities to explore how everyday practices in schools can be understood as political.

As I shared above, activities such as cooking and eating demonstrate how we learn to make personal choices from the tools and commodities present in the everyday. Here, in the everyday everyone has different bodies, needs, preferences, and memories. We each use our kitchen tools differently resulting in diverse practices of creativity. While these practices are not oppositional in nature, they can still be understood as a form of resistance to the colonisation of the everyday. Here, the term resistance does not necessarily mean direct opposition, but it refers to a set of actions that stubbornly persist beyond dominant structures, such as cooking.

Thus, I propose that resistance can be actions in the form of memory, cultural expression, bodily gestures, or habits and that these actions can also be embodied knowledge and that these aspects of human expression will never succeed in being wholly repressed. The theoretical terms we can use to describe this tension are strategies and tactics (de Certeau, 2002). A strategy is an attempt maintained by those in positions of power to discipline and organise. This strategy works by regulating what is 'proper' or 'appropriate'. An example of a strategy according to de Certeau, is a company that governs the schedule and behaviour of its workers, or a municipality that organises urban space in an attempt to control the movements of its citizens. Tactics are the everyday practices that subvert these disciplining strategies, that is — the moment when humans fail to be thoroughly disciplined. Tactics are actioned in moments such as when students scribble on school walls or they use the city in ways other than its intended function. Tactics often occur spontaneously at the body level, for example, when a worker's gestures fail to fully follow expectations. In the same way, we might view the design of education as a strategy based on dominant cultural knowledges and expectations. For another example, in Indonesia the Ministry of Education organises learning packages designed to discipline the mind. It demands strictness, though precalculated regulatory schedules, behaviours and parameters for the students. Meanwhile in response, tactics are constantly enacted in everyday life. While these tactics cannot dismiss or undo a strategy, they act as little resistances in daily life that demonstrate that students can never be entirely governed and controlled.

I would now like to return back to the cooking-doing activity in the SoIE. In the school, we can understand this common cooking practice as a tactic. The knowledge of everyday or common cooking is generally not revered. In culinary hierarchies, it is usually only the skills of the chef or cook that are considered worthy of attention. By prioritising cooking-doing in the everyday as knowledge expressed on its own terms, our school practices become a meaningful intervention.



Figure 2. School participants and the dining table near the kitchen. Photo courtesy of Gatari Surya Kusuma (August 8, 2020).

In the following section, I will discuss the dimension of play as a part of the everyday moment in our pandemic enforced virtual school during our shared reading of the Taman Siswa Movement.

III.

Notes from the inaugural meeting of the Taman Siswa reading club. —Tuesday, July 20, 2021.

The Taman Siswa reading club is part of the school agenda during the pandemic. Meetings are held virtually using the Gather platform. As a means of exchanging news and sharing a motivation to learn—and as many of the participants had not seen each other for a long time—we played Two Truths One Lie. This game session was used to share various personal interests in learning about Taman Siswa and how to read the topic in a unique way.

Since reading is not the only way to learn together, this game helps explore the history and methods of Taman Siswa for participants who don't have the energy and time to read. The rules of Two Truths One Lie are pretty simple. Participants will state two true statements and one lie in a small group. The three statements rely on the question, 'What made you interested in learning about Taman Siswa?'. Participants who are good at guessing which statements are true and false in the small group will be harvesters—a person who shares the key points discussed in the small group to the main group panel.

One of our friends, Moksha, joked about the harvester, calling it an 'ambassador of truth.' All participants laughed. The difficulty of guessing truthful and false statements varied in each group. It was easy to guess the truths and lies of some members because their body language changed every time

they or others told a lie. From this game, which later became a sharing moment, we came to know each other's reasons for and interest in learning Taman Siswa.

Notes from the third meeting of Taman Siswa reading clubs. —Wednesday, August 11, 2021.

This time the meeting relied on the experience of reading Kenji Tsuchiya's 'Democracy and Leadership, the rise of the Taman Siswa Movement in Indonesia' (1987/2019). Following the previous agreement, this session presents a role-playing game where we enact what we call a family framework as a means of reading Chapter 1 of Kenji Tsuchiya's book. Each group plays different family forms: a family of 1 father and 2 children; a nuclear family; a mother with two children; orphans; and non-blood families. This role-play is helpful in presenting a way of reading this book from the family's point of view, regardless of the content of the chapter.

*Reflections on Chapter 1 of each family are also interesting, one of which is a group with orphaned role-play. The orphans see intuitive wisdom (*kebijaksanaan*) based on feeling (*rasa*) and the courage to refuse. People outside the power must seek "kesakten" by learning independently. Orphans are often left by a protective figure or leader and abandoned by the state.*

Orphans are forced to take care of themselves and, in turn, enrich their own wisdom. Wisdom is the courage to refuse, not submit to power. In a broad sense, the counter institution is essential in the context of orphans because it often stands outside of something formal (such as the state). Instead of transferring supernatural powers from patrimonialism, different ways were developed from an orphaned position.¹

The reading club is an initial attempt to experiment with Taman Siswa's pedagogical practices, a movement that started in 1922 through the efforts of a small group of scholars to open a private school in Yogyakarta. The movement, led by Ki Hadjar Dewantara, advocated an independent national education system and based on the concept of Javanese culture, was used to mobilise the people against the Dutch colonial education system. In Indonesia, traditional schools with ascetic practices and self-discipline provide the model for the national education system. The dynamics of Taman Siswa are related to the conflict of the "Wild School Ordinance". This ordinance was introduced by the colonial government following the rapid growth of anti-colonial education in schools organised by Sarekat Islam and Taman Siswa, and other non-accredited organisations that were dubbed "Wild Schools".

The role play in the reading club session helps us to read and imagine what Taman Siswa would look like. This game not only helps us to be critical of the text that we read together, but also imagines other possibilities of understanding Taman Siswa. What is productive about this role-play was that it enabled further reflections on Taman Siswa's past educational practices and modified them for the purpose of our School. I noted two important points from playful reading on Taman Siswa's texts: independence and the household concept.

Independence (*kemandirian*) is related to the main principle of Taman Siswa education, known as the *among* system, which was aimed at maximising the child's educational instincts. Child education must also be based on local cultural context. This is exemplified using *dolanan* or children's games in Javanese. Traditional games have also been a concern for Dewantara. He conducted an extensive study of traditional children's games and found in them the raw materials to

¹ These notes were compiled from notes and audio recordings made during school meetings by several participants in the School of Improper Education and KUNCI Study Forum & Collective. In the school, participants take turns acting as the facilitator. Their job is to design a game that is suitable for reading specific book chapters within an agreed meeting date and time.

build suitable ways of learning. Play is a natural expression of the child's learning process, a culturally rich process enabling them active participation in the society. Furthermore, it explicitly connects the child's intellectual independence to the goal of education. Their abilities to be self-reliant and adaptable in learning are deemed important in the community and the wider world.

Taman Siswa also used the household as a basic principle for learning. Through this concept, the school is perceived as a family, where the (traditionally male) teacher and his spouse took the role of father and mother, with the students taking the role of the children. The school environment was designed to reflect the household atmosphere, not only in the relationship between teachers and students but also in the surrounding environment. To maintain these household principles and the school's natural Javanese atmosphere, Taman Siswa refused to accept financial assistance from the colonial government.

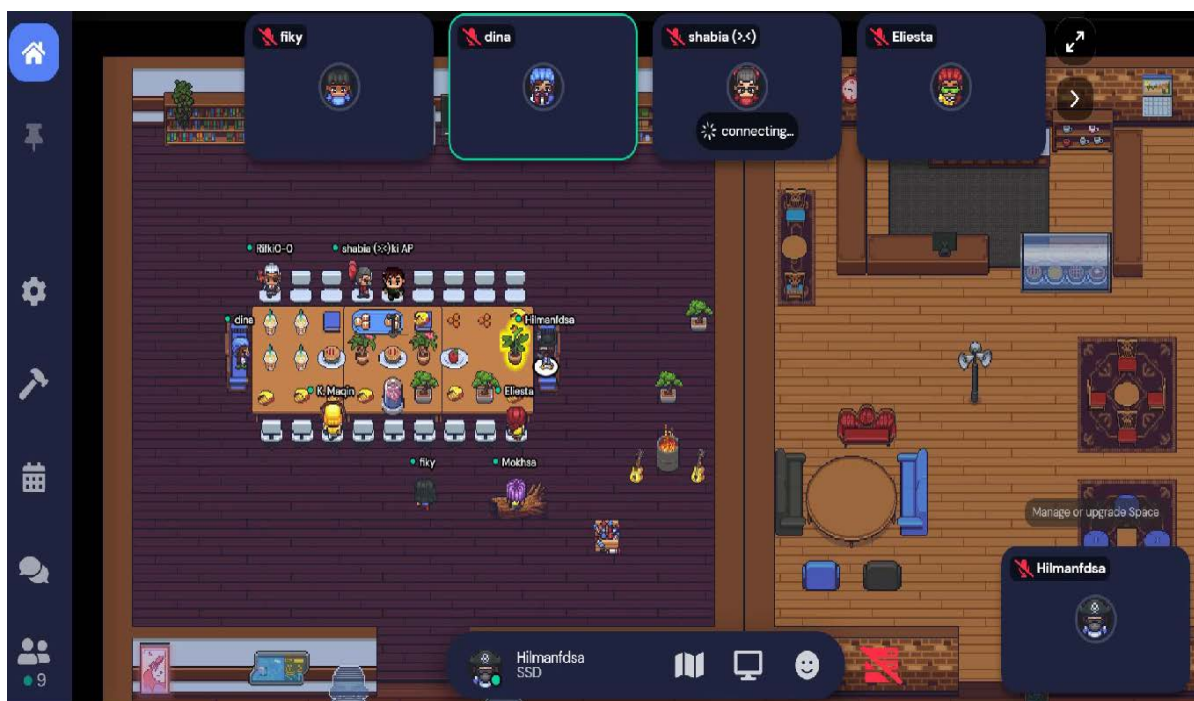


Figure 3. Reading club meeting in the virtual classroom (using the Gather Town Platform). The game highlights spaces and places related to everyday activities in and outside the school. Image courtesy of the School of Improper Education

This role-play invites us to treat play as a learning principle or demonstrates the role of play as a means of learning. When learning ceases to be a pleasure, we take this as a sign that the school is more focused on reproducing itself (as an institution) than forming shared knowledge among its participants. Learning is stimulating and pleasurable when the boundaries of the reading club are used to try new things. This means that learning involves many senses, feelings, and emotions. Learning and playing, including the dramatic and performative dimensions, emphasise the implications of our politics in the perceived realm because what emerges is the realm of collective experience.

Understood in this way, school is an articulation of the sensible, which includes the senses, thinking, feeling, and acting. For example, each political situation reflects a certain sensorium and set of conditions that determine why, how, and when we see things. In the period before and during

Indonesia's independence, traditional education needed a leader with wisdom and knowledge. Traditionally, these individuals were appointed due to their socio-economic privileges or their proximity to privilege bestowed by esoteric education and knowledge. In contemporary Indonesian society, equitable access to education for ordinary people has become a low concern in the political struggle. However, more than ever we need to consider the possibilities of other educational models so that the process of acquiring knowledge becomes visible.

However, the fusion of arts and school initiatives should be seen in a different context than the romanticism which established the aestheticisation of the totality of life and eventually emerged as art. The coexistence of art and school highlights the fact that aesthetic experiences permeate daily life. These experiences consider ordinary life equally noteworthy insofar as it relates to the emancipatory politics of the senses. Whether role-play in virtual classrooms belongs primarily to artistic practice or aesthetic experience is a political question that assigns voices deemed insignificant with significance.

Interpreting everyday experiences as meaningful can lead to a radical redistribution of the sensible as it relates to aesthetic education (Rancière, 2010). Such a redistribution emancipates students from the supremacy of rigid artistic forms and hierarchies. It offers a new way of imagining made possible by breaking the rules of aesthetic hierarchy. Western cultures are unique in locating the distinction between art and the broader social context, whereas for most other cultures, it is simply a part of everyday life. For example, food plates have extraordinary visual beauty. The games that are played in the school also provide aesthetic joy and playful moments of pleasure. Games, play, cooking, and friendship contain practices that exist well beyond their utilitarian functions. They express what it is to live one's life in the everyday instead of creating moments disconnected from everyday life and accessible to only a few.

The practice of the common school incorporates the pleasures of everyday practice into its aesthetic education. Such an approach poses a significant challenge to current thinking and opens up exciting possibilities for education. How can we implement education embedded in shared activity? How does this challenge our skills and roles as teachers/students, participants, or facilitators?

IV.

While based on existing everyday activities and rituals, the school does not simply emerge from nothing. There are a series of considered prompts that make the school possible. One of these prompts is duration. The activities implemented by the school are not one-off projects, but integrated elements built into the school—namely that it is common, ongoing, playful, and accessible to participants and the surrounding community. I have emphasised how everyday and play are an important and conscious part of operating a school and make the learning experience possible. This experience emerges as something that can be sensed by school participants, without intermediaries other than facilitation, circulation of ways of knowing, and class rituals. I emphasise that both the everyday and play can be the basis for the presupposition of equality. The study forum as a collection of people who learn together acts as an agent, allowing participants to find answers to their own problems. The school should not simply transfer knowledge to its participants but 'facilitate pedagogical situations' for them to use their own experiences and ways of thinking. All

participants have the opportunity to gain knowledge. This pedagogical practice invites us to consider epistemological symmetry.

The everyday and play as part of schooling can contribute to a form of democratisation that breaks down educational hierarchies. Activities within the framework of the everyday and play activate the experiences, feelings, and reflections of participants. These aspects of their experiences move towards emancipation. It is emancipatory because everyone gets equal opportunities to notice, sense and think in an everyday setting. Alternative education projects do not result in individual claims, even though everyone has personal experiences and biographies. These projects connect personal experiences to the collective categories embedded in facilitation and role-sharing while running the school. In the activities of the everyday and play, there is a real opportunity to achieve a new view of democracy through learning from ‘below’.

Biography

Khoiril Maqin is a writer, editor, and translator based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. His writing revolves around the politics of everyday life, aesthetics, and education. He joined the School of Improper Education run by KUNCI Study Forum & Collective in 2016. Since then, he has collaborated with KUNCI on various projects, including Kunci Copy Station and the Ufuk — Publishing the Future project at the Jakarta Biennale in 2021. He studied cultural studies at Sanata Dharma University, Indonesia.

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¹ Managerialism eliminates schooling for ‘the public/community’ and replaces it with market language about efficiency, profit, and competition. Anything that is not easy to calculate is belittled or renounced. For this topic, see Abraham-Hamanoiel, A., Freedman, D., Khiabany, G., Nash, K., & Petley, J. (eds.). (2017). *Liberalism in Neoliberal Times: Dimensions, Contradictions, Limits*. MIT Press.

² My reflection today may not represent all participant's voices and processes within the school. This article is a companion piece for existing and future essays and reflections.

³ Inkung chicken is a traditional Javanese culinary dish made from a whole cooked chicken. It is usually made for ceremonies and offerings.