



**THE SPECTRE OF PAEDOCRACY IN THE PUPPET THEATRE:
ON SCHOOL SELF-MANAGEMENT AND THE LIMITS
OF CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN THE FIRST YEARS OF SOVIET RULE**

Kirill Maslinsky

National Research University Higher School of Economics

16 Soyuzna Pechatnikov Str., St Petersburg, Russia

Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House), Russian Academy of Sciences

4 Makarova Emb., St Petersburg, Russia

kmaslinsky@pushdom.ru

Abstract: The 1920s in Soviet Russia are known to have been a period of unprecedented growth in children's autonomy in various fields of social life. The decision to introduce children's self-management to the comprehensive labour schools, taken by Narkompros in 1918, belongs here. Over the next decade this radical idea, extended to all the schools in the country, rapidly decayed into a more moderate pedagogical position which took the form of a set of unobtrusive everyday practices, principally the organisation of meetings, and rotas for classroom-tidying and other practical tasks. This article analyses the evolution of the idea and the practices of self-management on the basis of published and archival sources containing a description of the practices and statements of pedagogues, teachers and schoolchildren about school self-management. An analysis of the arguments in favour of the extension of restriction of children's agency within self-management indicates that teachers perceived the introduction of self-management as an attack on their own authority, and that there was a wide consensus among pedagogues that children's agency must be supervised, particularly in decision-making. The contradiction between declarations of children's autonomy and the need for supervision by a pedagogue was resolved by appealing to the skill of pedagogy in making the manipulation of children imperceptible.

Keywords: children's agency, school self-management, Soviet Russia.

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Kirill Maslinsky

The Spectre of Paedocracy in the Puppet Theatre: On School Self-Management and the Limits of Children's Agency in the First Years of Soviet Rule

The 1920s in Soviet Russia are known to have been a period of unprecedented growth in children's autonomy in various fields of social life. The decision to introduce children's self-management to the comprehensive labour schools, taken by Narkompros in 1918, belongs here.¹ Over the next decade this radical idea, extended to all the schools in the country, rapidly decayed into a more moderate pedagogical position which took the form of a set of unobtrusive everyday practices, principally the organisation of meetings, and rotas for classroom-tidying and other practical tasks. This article analyses the evolution of the idea and the practices of self-management on the basis of published and archival sources containing a description of the practices and statements of pedagogues, teachers and schoolchildren about school self-management. An analysis of the arguments in favour of the extension of restriction of children's agency within self-management indicates that teachers perceived the introduction of self-management as an attack on their own authority, and that there was a wide consensus among pedagogues that children's agency must be supervised, particularly in decision-making. The contradiction between declarations of children's autonomy and the need for supervision by a pedagogue was resolved by appealing to the skill of pedagogy in making the manipulation of children imperceptible.

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At the end of the last century a new attitude began to take root among researchers into childhood, a movement towards a change in the researcher's viewpoint: seeing the child not only as the object of education, inculturation and socialisation, but also as a subject who performs socially significant acts and, to a certain degree, forms social reality [Qvortrup et al. 1994]. But if at the beginning, this rhetoric quickly gained popularity, soon doubts began to emerge. One category that became an object of discussion was that of children's agency. Besides the purely methodological difficulties connected with the reconstruction of agency from different sources, the problem of the political presumptions on which the category of agency is based was also raised. The idea of agency proceeds from the far from universally recognised liberal model of the autonomous subject, and the set of forms of behaviour which are assessed as manifestations

Kirill Maslinsky

National Research University
Higher School of Economics
16 Soyuz Pechatnikov Str.,
St Petersburg, Russia /
Institute of Russian Literature
(The Pushkin House),
Russian Academy of Sciences
4 Makarova Emb., St Petersburg,
Russia
kmaslinsky@pushdom.ru

¹ Prior to 1918, the Russian educational system had included private establishments and schools run by local authorities (*zemstva*) as well as government ministries, all with their own specific programmes and syllabuses. The introduction of the comprehensive labour school (*edinaya trudovaya shkola*) aimed (with mixed success) to replace this variety of provision, and minute hierarchical differentiation, by integrated and egalitarian state-run schools that emphasised group work ('the brigade system'), interdisciplinary study, novel forms of assessment such as project and group work, and practical knowledge [Eds.].

of agency is clearly ethnocentric in character [Ruddick 2007; Lancy 2012; Holloway, Holt, Mills 2019]. Still, however just this criticism might be, it is not so clear whether there is a consensus regarding an alternative research programme. Is it useful to continue to expand the range of phenomena interpreted as manifestations of the child's active position once we have hedged the term 'agency' about with the relevant qualifications? Or should we return to the status quo in childhood research and abandon the search for a politicised and somewhat illusory agency?

The political nature of the category of agency as applied to children is clearly visible if the academic discussion is compared with the historical contexts in which children, as a social group, have been the object of political game-playing. In this respect the early Soviet period is well known. In the first stage of its existence the Soviet regime set itself the task of creating a new man and was, at the same time, extremely hostile towards and suspicious of those adults whose outlook had been formed under the Tsars and who were not loyal to the new authorities. The Bolsheviks were inclined to regard children as 'a clean sheet of paper', the group which was most susceptible of all to social engineering [Balashov 2003: 22]. Counting on their loyalty, the new regime took certain political steps that might be called 'a bargain with children', offering them somewhat greater agency. In legal terms this was most clearly manifested in family law, which extended children's opportunities to make themselves independent of their parents, though in practice there were hardly any significant changes [Kelly 2007: 62–5]. If we look at the distribution of material resources, it is obvious that children were a low priority against the background of the more pressing tasks of retaining power [Livschiz 2007: 46]. The main action took place at the level of propagandist rhetoric.

In the first decade of the existence of the Soviet state, there appeared here and there within the space of public discourse images of children in roles as social actors which had not been normal for them before. One recognisable image from this period was Alexey Komarov's poster 'The Children's Meeting' (1923), on which children barely a year old are speaking from the platform and holding up banners demanding healthy parents and clean nappies. Commenting on the paradoxical subject of this poster (words and political statements placed in the mouths of children still unable to speak), Sara Weld uses the metaphor of children as puppets in this political drama. She thereby underlines the reverse effect: not only have the adults not given voice to children here, they have done worse than that — they have usurped the child's voice [Weld 2014: 11–2]. The metaphor of puppets is no accident here, because, as we shall see below, it resonates both with the discourse of the contemporaries of the poster, and with the basic premise of this article:

that political declarations recognising the agency of children (in any political sphere, broadly understood) regularly have as their effect that the manipulation of children becomes normalised both in discourse and in practice.

One sphere in which the Bolsheviks tried to make a 'bargain with children', once they had come to power, was school education. As early as November 1917, Narkompros began to take certain political steps directed towards an expansion of children's agency in practice. The first of these was the introduction of representatives of the pupils on pedagogical committees [Balashov 2003: 180]. This was followed by the 1918 decree of Narkompros establishing school self-management and a series of measures, taken over the following decade, in the same direction. For the Russian pedagogical community of this time the idea of self-management was associated first and foremost with the international reform movement, the so-called 'new pedagogy', upon which Soviet educational reformers oriented themselves to a large extent, both in the sphere of the content and methods of teaching and in the organisational plan [Mchitarjan 2015]. Children's self-management was included in the Soviet decrees about labour schools as part of a package of innovations modelled on the new pedagogy in the West (for example, on abolition of homework see: [Gill, Schlossman 1996]).

Narkompros thus became the initiator of the dissemination of the practices of self-management far beyond the narrow community of partisans of free education who had occupied themselves with this topic in the second decade of the century. Wider pedagogical opinion perceived this innovation primarily as a political *démarche* ('a concession to the *Zeitgeist*') [Golubev 1918: 25].

This situation provoked a wide pedagogical discussion of school self-management which continued all through the 1920s. It is this discussion that will be analysed in this article. By examining the arguments that pedagogues put forward to justify or condemn particular everyday practices connected with self-management, how their polemic developed and what practical result it led to, I hope to raise to the metalevel the academic discussion on the applicability of the category of agency to children. In other words, my aim is to identify certain social and discursive mechanisms that govern the reaction to the discussion of the bounds of children's agency.

Two kinds of sources serve as material for my analysis. The first are publications on the questions of school self-management in the national and regional pedagogical press, and also separate brochures. These publications may be subdivided into three types: articles by theorists of education discussing what school self-management ought and ought not to represent; articles by teachers and head teachers setting out their own experience of organising self-

management; and the rarer and more interesting articles by outside observers, including inspectors and researchers, describing the practices of self-management that they had discovered in schools. Authors of all three types are undoubtedly biased in their choice of the practices that they find it necessary to reveal or conceal, often with sharply polarised evaluations. The second kind of sources are the minutes of the meetings of school pedagogical committees of the period, which allow an evaluation of the extent to which the central policy and discussions were embodied in the everyday practice of ordinary schools on the ground. To this end I made use of the archive of the Lodeynoe Pole Boys' Classical High School (*Gimnaziya*), which had been turned into a comprehensive labour school.¹

School self-management in the first decade of Soviet rule was not homogeneous in either the temporal or spatial dimension. There is hardly any reason to believe that the position of Narkompros was the defining one. After the initial steps that established school self-management as an institution, the actions of Narkompros towards organising self-management are a fine illustration of Larry Holmes's favourite thesis that in the management of Soviet education, policy followed practice [Holmes 1989; 1991: 69–82]. Therefore, in order to put the discussion on school self-management into context, it is necessary to give a brief outline of the changes in self-management practices in the course of the 1920s.

In 1918, both in the official statements of Narkompros and in the pedagogical literature, self-management was explicitly opposed to the prerevolutionary system of repressive discipline in schools. The introduction of self-management to the comprehensive labour schools was clearly associated with the idea of solving the problem of discipline in a completely new, free manner, so that the children should discipline themselves instead of being subjected to constant and intrusive surveillance, policing from the outside. This was advertised as nothing less than a change in the school disciplinary paradigm.

The teaching personnel, who have undoubtedly spent much time and effort on organising the school management, are now rewarded a hundredfold by the results that have been achieved: no frayed nerves, no fear of excesses or of an organised assault on discipline, as it used to be in the old school, where discipline had the character of policing and was imposed by fear, investigation and punishment, which provoked a burning dislike of teachers and school and divided the teachers and their pupils into two hostile camps [Ilyin 1918: 17].

¹ Central State Archive of St Petersburg (TsGA SPb), fond R-787. This collection is convenient because its documentary sources, including the minutes of the pedagogical committees, for the first ten years after the revolution, are preserved practically without any gaps. [Lodeynoe Pole is a small town about 250 km north-east of St Petersburg that is the centre of an administrative district. — Eds.].

This is the starting point of the rather complex and non-linear history of the practices of self-management in Soviet schools. It all begins with a few formal steps. The most notable and definite of these, which did indeed have consequences in schools on the ground, was the introduction of pupil representatives on the school councils. Children appeared at the same sessions as their teachers and the administrators of the schools they attended.¹ One of the questions discussed in connection with this innovation was whether children should have advisory or voting rights at school councils [Golubev 1918: 3].

One of the features of the first years after the revolution was a great attention to and fondness for meetings of various kinds, including children's meetings. It was the meeting of schoolchildren that was perceived as the prototypical organ and mode of existence of self-management. It became, moreover, a point of discussion whether pedagogues should have advisory or voting rights at the children's meetings [Pistrak 1923: 168]. The high status of assemblies and the significance of the assembly as a form of social education (including the skills of speaking and minute-taking) can be clearly traced in the contents of school textbooks and primers of the 1920s, in which minutes are used as one of the forms of learning to write [Barannikova, Bezrogov 2011]. Meetings of children were conducted at all age-levels down to kindergarten. For example, in 1922 a kindergarten teacher published a report on the successes of self-management in a group of five-year-old children, in which their meetings are vividly described [Sergeeva 1922]. One kind of children's meeting that was closely associated of the practices of self-management was the school 'comradely court', which dealt with disciplinary matters. The appearance of school courts in early Soviet practice was reinforced on the one hand by certain historical and contemporary models from European schools which were widely cited in prerevolutionary and Soviet pedagogical publications (see, for example: [*Novye idei v pedagogike* 1912; Ilyin 1918; Krupskaya 1918; Spasskaya 1918]), and on the other by the expansion of comradely courts in the adult milieu [Sieglebaum 1992].

Some of the practices that made up the new institution of 'self-management' were more traditional or even directly borrowed from prerevolutionary schools. In particular, the duty rota (*dezhurstvo*) system became a form of self-management.² Whereas previously, those fulfilling tasks on the rota had been appointed by the form

¹ Beginning in 1918, two names of 'pupil representatives' figure in the lists of members present in all the minutes of the school council at Lodeynoe Pole School [TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 1].

² An alternative translation for *dezhurstvo* would be 'prefect system', but in UK practice, this is normally applied to senior pupils who are supposed to enact disciplinary roles and act as examples for their fellows and juniors, rather than to those expected to clean the blackboard and water plants, etc. [Eds.].

teacher, in the comprehensive labour school, they were chosen by the children themselves in a democratic manner, such as election by a show of hands, and the pedagogues advertised this as an element of school self-management.

Children's autonomy in school self-management seems to have reached its highest point for the whole early Soviet period in the years 1920–3. Even then, however, it was far from universal, and was most characteristic of young offenders' institutions: in closed communities of children cut off from their families such experiments were relatively easily conducted and effective.¹ The imagery and narrative of self-management in young offenders' institutions are well-known from the literature of the period: *The Republic of ShKID* by Grigori Belykh and L. Panteleyev² and *The Pedagogical Poem* by Anton Makarenko. It was experience in young offenders' institutions that formed the basis for pedagogical publications' models of developed self-management systems, including some that had their own legislative foundation, from lists of rules to full-blown constitutions [Ivanovskiy 1923; 'Iz istorii...' 1923; 'Konstitutsiya samopravleniya...' 1923; Kudybov 1923; Poznanskiy 1923; Solovyev 1923]. The disciplinary practices of self-management were much widely discussed, including various investigative and disciplinary committees and the comrades' court, all made up of children; many instances of children imposing punishments on their fellow-pupils, and seeing these were enacted, are described. Pedagogues' opinions on the acceptability of these practices were divided [Ivanov 1923; Klodt 1923; Krupenina 1923; Iordanskiy 1924].

Among the evidence of the high level of children's agency in domestic and disciplinary matters there are references to 'outrageous occurrences' [Golubev 1918: 26] when children's agency exceeded the bounds that pedagogues regarded as acceptable. The actual forms that these occurrences took are usually shrouded in silence, although the historical record does describe situations in which the pupils' committee had its own typist and printing facilities and co-operated directly with the education department [Rozhkov 2016: 74–86]. Children trying to manage their own schools were the bugbear of pedagogues reflecting on the experience of school self-management of the first years after the revolution. The number of publications on this topic reached its peak in 1923, and that moment may be

¹ The models for practices of pupil self-management in European pedagogy came mostly from teaching establishments where the children were permanently resident (boarding schools, pensions, borstals) [*Novye idei v pedagogike* 1912: 49; Good 1945: 117].

² L. Panteleyev (1908–1987) is often referred to as 'Leonid Panteleyev', but in fact the writer's real name was Alexei Eremeev. *The Republic of ShKID* (*Shkola imeni Dostoevskogo*, or the Dostoevsky School, 1927) is set in a model reformatory for children, as is *The Pedagogical Poem*, but while the former novel fell into official disfavour in the 1930s and was not reprinted till the 1960s, the latter remained a classic from the moment of its first publication in 1933–5 [Eds.].

regarded as the point of reflection on forms and practices when the purpose of the discussion was seen as deciding what self-management should and should not be [‘Tezisy...’ 1923]. It is noteworthy that after 1924 the distribution of certain practices changes sharply. Comrades’ courts with a disciplinary function cease to be mentioned almost immediately, and the question of whether schoolchildren should be allowed to vote on decisions disappears almost entirely from the discussion. After 1924 it is almost impossible to find any description in pedagogical publications of examples of situations in which children imposed punishments on their fellows. To all appearances agency was on the wane.

In 1924–6, Narkompros continued to exert pressure (and for the first time to concrete effect) on schools for the general population with the aim of inculcating school self-management.¹ Its circulars arrived at the regional schools and were discussed at the pedagogical councils, and self-management was reflected in the school reports and evaluated during inspections.² By that time there had come into being a cycle of self-management practices that seem to have been accepted everywhere. Firstly, there were still representatives of the pupils on the school council. Assemblies of the whole school, election procedures, and all kinds of commissions had become part of everyday school life. However, at this period, meetings for school pupils were seldom used any longer for deciding organisational questions, and were progressively taking on a disciplinary function, that is, they were held in order to discuss bad behaviour on the part of the schoolchildren (though they were no longer called courts). Secondly, the rota system occupies a central place in school documents as a form of self-management, becoming a convenient means, as in the traditions of the prerevolutionary school, of organising self-service, record-keeping, and hygiene amongst the children.³

1927, when there was another surge in publications on the topic of school self-management, may be called the second point of reflection. As well as publications by practising teachers interpreting their

¹ After criticism in 1923 from the district department of education for the lack of self-management at Lodeynoe Pole School, a pupil presented a paper on the aims and tasks of school self-management to the school council in October 1924, and the pedagogues welcomed the new school self-management under the leadership of the Komsomol and promised to support it. In November and December of the same year the pedagogical council discussed the modest attainments of self-management: ‘Egorova — What is the children’s attitude to self-management? — There is not much awareness, but they are gradually being drawn into it’ [TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 13, ff. 30, 32v; d. 29, ff. 6, 9v, 12v; d. 39, ff. 36–7v].

² In March 1925 the Leningrad Provincial Education Department issued a circular on school-pupil self-management with commentary [TsGA SPb, f. R-2552, op. 1, d. 2079].

³ At Lodeynoe Pole School in January 1926, in a report to the pedagogical council on the workings of self-management in two groups, it was noted that ‘Self-management in the class has hitherto been cast in the form of an ordinary rota of duties’ and ‘Self-management is present in the form of rotas of duties’ [TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 39, ff. 2–3].

experience, there were summative works by pedagogues and a few summative works based on surveys of schoolchildren's activities in terms of self-management [Rubinshteyn 1925; A. K. 1927; Petrov 1927; Ilyina 1928; Poznanskiy 1928; Tyzhnov 1928]. This surge may have been partly provoked by officials of Narkompros trying to evaluate the progress of school self-management in the practice of general schools. The main question they were asking was: was there any actual school self-management or was it all window dressing? The majority of the summations were critical. It was clearly visible from the surveys that boundaries had been drawn around those spheres in which no one objected to children's self-management: discipline, record-keeping and self-service. However, the practices that had taken root in general schools completely discredited the initial idea for the sake of which school self-management had been introduced, and by the end of NEP this was particularly obvious, and it was still possible openly to acknowledge it in print.

It turns out that on all sides self-organisation is in reality developing in school pupils feelings and attitudes towards the collective and towards their comrades which are the reverse of those which Soviet pedagogy promotes. This happens particularly often when the children's self-organisations mainly include disciplinary and registration functions [Ilyina 1928: 67].

After 1926, and until the end of the 1920s, the practices of school self-management gradually changed. Duty rotas continued to have their place. A differentiation in the form of self-management for junior and senior schools was introduced. A gradual unification of the forms of self-management across all schools ensued. Attempts to find convenient means of using self-management to solve disciplinary questions that worked in practice continued to be made, and in particular the disciplining of badly-behaved pupils was transferred from school assemblies to class assemblies [Elyashuk 1927: 141; Perfilov 1928: 60; Belousov 1933: 74]. The most substantial change was connected with the arrangements for integrating the Pioneers and Komsomol into the schools, which in those years was still very far from a reality.¹ Nevertheless pressure from Narkompros to increase the role of the Pioneer movement produced a diarchy of the Pioneers and the system of self-management when it came to disciplinary regulation of the children, which in some schools led to open conflict [Livschiz 2007: 110–2]. When Anatoly Lunacharsky left the post of People's Commissar for Education in 1929, the topic of school self-management was finally put to rest. This can be clearly

¹ From reports on the working of self-management at Lodeynoe Pole School in 1926: 'The linkage between self-management work and the Pioneer squad is weak'; 'Chepygin: The role of the Pioneer squad in self-management? — The Pioneer squad doesn't play any role in this work: there is no internal connection' [TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 39, ff. 2, 37v].

traced in the quantity of publications on school self-management recorded in the *Pedagogical Bibliography* [*Pedagogicheskaya bibliografiya 1924–1930* 1967; *Pedagogicheskaya bibliografiya 1931–1935* 1970]: at the beginning of the 1930s it falls sharply, and by 1935 there is nothing to be found apart from some extremely tedious methodical instructions.

Including the statements about school self-management published in the course of more than ten years in a single 'discussion' must, of course, be somewhat provisional. However, this process allows us, on the one hand, to identify stable positions that lasted for the whole of this period, and on the other to follow their evolution.

The idea that children should have full autonomy in taking decisions at school was a frightening one for the pedagogical community, even for the apologists of self-management. As early as 1918, the Petrograd Teachers' Union propositions for the autonomous school gave a cautious warning that 'self-management must be imbued with a comradely spirit and not lead to a replacement of the teachers' professional authority by an autocracy of the pupils' [*Organizatsiya avtonomnoy shkoly* 1918: 84].¹ Those who in later years looked back at the experience of the first years after the revolution, when children's autonomy could in certain cases be quite considerable, characterised these episodes as having 'a distinct flavour of paedocracy' [Ivanovskiy 1923: 25], and regretted how 'the teacher had voluntarily set fire to his own authority' [Pedkolektiv massovoy shkoly Sergachskogo uezda 1927: 37]. Against the background of these apprehensions, pedagogues were trying to feel their way towards a discourse that would allow them to justify the preservation of the imbalance of power at school in the teachers' favour, while saving face and proposing an acceptable model of children's self-management.

If one sums up the arguments in favour of expanding or restricting children's autonomy (and at the same time agency) in school self-management, it is immediately apparent that the arguments for expansion are all of the same kind. To use a modern term, all these arguments may be called technocratic. Everyone writes about efficiency: when self-management is successfully organised, discipline sorts itself out very well.

Indeed, in many cases pupils' organisations, led by the teacher, have succeeded in achieving very considerable results in the struggle for firm, responsible discipline during lessons, during break and in the

¹ It is noteworthy that this formula is borrowed word-for-word from proposition 11 of the translation, published in 1912, of Steinecke's paper 'How Far Can Relations Between the School and Its Pupils Be Improved and Renewed by the Reform of the School Character Proposed by Dr Foerster?' [*Novye idei v pedagogike* 1912: 122].

canteen. The brigade that undertook the investigation of the village schools of the Western Oblast unanimously stress that they have not observed a single instance when a teacher had to break off his work in order to restore order, or even to issue individual warnings. The pupils themselves react unanimously and sharply to the slightest breach of order by their comrades. Good discipline in class and in the school is an established system [Belousov 1933: 73].

The idea of the disciplinary efficiency of school self-management had been discussed in prerevolutionary pedagogical publications in translated works, mostly by German and Swiss pedagogues [*Novye idei v pedagogike* 1912], who in turn cited, among other things, the American experience of Wilson Gill's school cities [Ferster 1914: 231–3]. The basic arguments urged in favour of self-management from the disciplinary point of view were that children more readily submit to rules which they have had some part in establishing, and that delegating the supervision of their comrades to children frees the teacher from exhausting minor disciplinary regulation [*Novye idei v pedagogike* 1912: 63–9, 81]. These ideas were propagated in Russia to a large extent thanks to accounts and descriptions by native authors which later found their way into the Soviet press [Ilyin 1918; Krupskaya 1918; Spasskaya 1918; *Samoupravlenie v trudovoy shkole* 1924].¹

The arguments in favour of limiting agency were more diverse. Firstly it is possible to identify a group of psychological arguments that appeal to ideas of the capabilities of children of a particular age. In particular, one argument for criticising the comrades' court pointed to the cruelty of children, who may be greatly lacking in sensitivity when imposing punishments on their comrades. Besides, they are immature: children are inconsistent, they do not carry out their own decisions, are distracted in the middle of a meeting by some abstract topics, and so on.

But that is not what happened in reality. When the children were left to themselves, the result was confusion, they did not consider their comrades' actions sufficiently thoughtfully, often issued 'harsh' decisions, and it happened that these decisions were not put into effect, so that the significance of the court was discredited [Kudybov 1923: 105].

¹ The idea of using self-management to sort out discipline had a very wide international currency in pedagogy, going beyond the bounds of the 'new pedagogy' of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The co-operation of the children was also used as a disciplinary resource in more traditional pedagogical systems, such as the Catholic schools of England [Caparrini 2003]. The influence of the 'new pedagogy' could extend far beyond the geographical and chronological limits of its European nucleus. Thus, thanks to Dewey's influence and visit, the practices of self-management spread to some schools in China, and in the second half of the 1920s they took on a distinctly disciplinary direction [Culp 1998]. Disciplinary efficiency was used as an argument for introducing self-management in the second half of the twentieth century in Sweden [Landal 2015].

Children were thus ultimately criticised for lacking pedagogical awareness: when they received agency, they did not turn into pedagogues, either at the psychological or at the organisational level. Another group of arguments were social arguments. There are frequent indications of the sort of undesirable behaviour held to be typical of children ('children's social deficiencies') — fighting, pilfering, swearing. The main sources of children's social deficiencies, in the eyes of Soviet pedagogues, were the upbringing they received at home (particularly in rural areas) and the bad influence of the street [Gelmont 1927: 12].

However, notwithstanding the arguments put forward for and against children's agency, there was a remarkably abiding consensus among pedagogues of all tendencies in the 1920s regarding the limits to children's autonomy in school self-management. All pedagogues proposed as a solution, in one form or another, directed, or stimulated agency.

*Fighting, pilfering, swearing, indiscipline during lessons inevitably require intervention, and it is again the teacher's task to evoke **in the child the urge himself** to direct his life into the correct path by calling his attention to abnormal phenomena [Samoupravlenie v trudovoy shkole 1924: 19; emphasis mine. — K.M.].*

In this quotation, the model of causation is very telling: the pedagogue must generate the urge, but it must become the child's own urge. This model fits the general picture of the transformation of the approach to discipline in the new pedagogy of the first third of the twentieth century: a transition from the regulation of the child's outward forms of behaviour to the regulation of his/her inner life (structure of motivation, inclinations, etc.), which Ludwig Pongratz has characterised within Foucault's model of disciplinary power as a transition to soft forms of control [Pongratz 2007: 35–8].

Here we see the fine, even dialectical line between the objectivisation and subjectivisation of the child, and it is this vision that is the general, canonical answer of pedagogues to the question of how children's agency should be managed. This line may be clearly traced in the series of opposed terms that are mustered in rhetorical constructions to indicate a certain 'middle way' between the extremes of a complete absence of external control over children (autocracy, paedocracy) and complete pedagogical control. Self-management and absence of control are opposed thus: 'In no circumstances should pupils' self-management reach the point of an absence of control <...> all meetings, resolutions and actions of this organisation must take place with the knowledge of the pedagogical council' [Ilyin 1918: 24]. The term *initiative* is opposed to the language of legal acts. In a review of the material obtained from a survey of children on self-management, there is an example of a statement in which schoolchildren talk about

their right to have issues raised at the assembly. It is telling that even as he quotes the ‘children’s voices’, the pedagogue strives to muffle them,¹ proposing an interpretative framework of his own and at the same time denying the children the political right to determine the agenda of the meeting: ‘It is not, of course, a matter of “questions for discussion” here, but of the pedagogue’s task of evoking, encouraging and developing children’s initiative, and assisting the growth of the independent activity of the children’s collective’ [Petrov 1927: 52]. Correct pedagogical behaviour regarding children’s self-management is defined by a movement from *suppressing* to *assisting*: ‘It is the teacher’s obligation to assist in every way in organising school self-management and ensuring that it is conducted in the most rational way. However, he should allow his pupils complete autonomy and try not to pressurise them by his authority’ [*Samoupravlenie v trudovoy shkole* 1924: 4].

If one examines how the behavioural limits of child autonomy in the school self-management sphere are formulated, they turn out to be very variable and change greatly over time. On the scale of the entire period of the discussion of the 1920s I have managed to discover only two rather trivial constants. All the pedagogues agreed that, firstly, children can organise their duty rotas independently, and secondly that children must not be allowed to conduct meetings and take decisions without adults present.² The question of the degree and character of adults’ participation at children’s meetings, and their right to vote, was debatable, but the question of their presence was never open to doubt.

From the descriptions of school meetings in the literature, one may conclude that by the end of the 1920s a definite practice had come into being, of the teacher being present and sitting at a back desk.

Under this pretext self-management has taken forms of this sort: the teacher is the leader, the director, the commander, the ‘senior comrade’, who can call general meetings without their knowledge and agreement, allow people to speak (even though he sits at a back desk and not at the chairman’s table), and raise questions, i.e. he fulfils all the functions of the ‘senior comrade’ [Tyzhnov 1928: 97].

It can be seen here how the idea of self-management, which was to a large extent imposed by Narkompros, and the form of the meeting, prompted by the overall political spirit of the times, had taken shape in everyday practice in general schools beyond the limits of special

¹ Sue Ruddick offers a very apt name for this sort of way in which adults use ‘the child’s voice’ — ventriloquist discourse [Ruddick 2007: 12–3].

² The only example known to me of a school at which the pedagogues openly avowed that they allowed pupils’ self-management meetings to take place without their own participation belongs to the prerevolutionary period — Levitskaya’s Grammar School at Tsarskoye Selo [Ivanova 2011].

pedagogical experiments. Within this practice it is the teacher whose role it is to organise and direct the course of the meeting. Nevertheless, this way of directing children was not, by this time, the norm for everybody. Those teachers and observers who found this situation problematic use theatrical metaphors, which is interesting:

*We were faced with the question of what was to happen next. We had to manage the children's court, and this led in the end to the loss of the children's autonomy, and the court, like the other organs of children's self-management, turned into an organ not only led by adults, but exclusively carrying out **the will of adults: the children and the whole court had turned into a puppet theatre** [Kudybov 1923: 105; emphasis mine. — K.M.].*

The conversation on children's self-management is here translated into terms very close to the discourse of agency. The author sees the problem as lying not in the fact that the children do not have their own agenda, but in the fact that they do not have freedom of action, which turns the court into a puppet theatre. An observer in 1931 records a very similar impression:

However, do we in fact know how to conduct children's meetings? No, we make a mess of children's meetings, we play at conducting them. I have had occasion to attend many children's school meetings. They were not meetings, they were total farces. The children would choose a committee, which would proceed to 'sweat it out' while saying next to nothing, and behind the elected members sat the teacher, who would dictate every step, every word. The result was an empty show. Meetings with a prompter do not satisfy children. Children on collective farms or industry can see real meetings and compare them with their own, and the result is completely ridiculous [Loshman 1931: 60].

Both observers found the problem to be the evident artificiality of the situation and ultimately the adults' disingenuousness, and this problem did not disappear by the end of the 1920s.

The way out of the resulting contradiction between the declared ideals and the actual practice of school self-management proposed by the pedagogues of the 1920s is very interesting: some participants in the discussion see the solution as increasing the appearance of autonomy in children's meetings, and not in unmasking the true role of the adults. This position too is also a constant over the whole period:

*It remains only to be added that the teachers **do not openly participate** in the work of these organisations, except for the general meetings, where we must always be present [Bagretsov 1924: 32; emphasis mine. — K.M.].*

It is evident from the very word 'self-management' that nobody can manage them from the outside or take charge of their affairs. The

*teacher's task is to interpret, to take part in meetings if he is invited, in a word, to assist them wherever he can, and **direct them imperceptibly**, unobtrusively, as they say, tactfully [Zhelokhovtseva 1929: 7; emphasis mine. — K.M.].*

Here pedagogues see their work as successful when they do not dictate every step to the children, and in this case they do not even raise the question of children's agency. Success for the pedagogue is when the strings of the marionettes are no longer visible.

The evolution regarding children's agency within the discussion of the 1920s is most easily traced by analysing the category of the teacher's authority. At the beginning of the period, authority is placed firmly in opposition to children's agency.

Pupils' self-management has not been sufficiently achieved because previously in our school pupils' self-management took ugly forms and led to a fall in the teachers' authority; now, when the school is beginning more or less to sort itself out, the first thing that must be done is to raise the teachers' authority, and then gradually to introduce some forms or other of pupils' self-management [TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 13, f. 30v].

Alongside the rhetoric of the confrontation between authority and self-management there appears the idea that correctly constructed authority, on the contrary, favours co-operation with pupils in the work of self-management.

The greatest amount of debate was provoked by the point about allowing the leaders only advisory, and not voting rights at the general assemblies. It was clearly felt here that the representatives of those households where the relationship between adults and children is close and founded upon mutual trust were in favour of giving voting rights to the adults, but where this relationship was not so good, the children were not prepared to assent to this, although they understood that adults could not be excluded altogether (although they might not be averse to excluding them). The question was not decided either way [Pistrak 1923: 168].

This is some of the earliest evidence of the instrumental understanding of authority within the Soviet discussion of self-management. As, in the middle of the 1920s, Narkompros continued to put pressure on general schools, demanding reports on the working of self-management, the teachers saw the difficulty as lying in how to determine where the boundary was between their authority and the children's agency, and to identify the 'middle way':

Then there is no clearly defined position for teachers in the self-management structure: they often do not know where, according to the official position, their work begins and ends. In the end, children

are still children, and it is understandable that they cannot carry on their self-management consistently; that would require skills and experience that our children hardly have [TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 39, f. 39v].

The document cited shows that in 1926 teachers on the ground were still thinking of the task of organising self-management in terms of the boundary that needed to be drawn *between* their authority and children's agency. But there is hardly anything in the official documents of Narkompros about the role and rights of the teacher: it has to be worked out on the basis of ordinary law.¹

By the end of the period, a rhetorical construction takes shape in the pedagogical literature that points to the authority of the teacher (which is the instrument of control over children's agency) as the guarantee of the success of the workings of the 'puppet theatre' — success in the imperceptible and smooth manipulation of the children:

There is a very close-knit collective in this class: the authority of the teacher, Letunovskaya, is as high as it ought to be. Under her leadership the class has had an influence on 'P' and 'K'. At a class meeting, when almost everyone spoke to condemn what they had done, 'P' and 'K' had a hard time of it. Disapproval on the part of the collective of their comrades had more effect on them than being summoned to see me or calling their parents into school would have had. They both gave their word that they would improve [Pchelkina 1940: 18].

Although the example just given, strictly speaking, falls outside the time frame of the discussion under examination, it is nevertheless a logical result of this.

In conclusion, it may be noted that the initiator of the expansion of children's agency in the form of school self-management in the whole field of the Soviet school was Narkompros, which thereby put the teachers at these schools in the position of those who had to implement the policy. The teachers, however, who were by no means all supportive of this idea, reinterpreted it at the level of their everyday cultural map. This cultural map dictated to them that children's agency and their own authority in the school were, in the language of modern political science, a zero-sum game, or, to use a classical folkloristic term, followed a principle of limited good [Foster 1965]. In their eyes, the wider the children's agency, the

¹ For example, in the letter of instruction on the organisation of self-management circulated to schools by the Leningrad Provincial Department of Public Education in 1925, the teacher's role is only briefly mentioned in the last paragraph and in very vague expressions: 'The role of the pedagogue in the work of establishing and developing self-management is envisaged as the role of the responsible organiser' [TsGA SPb, f. R-2552, op. 1, d. 2079].

narrower their own authority, and vice versa. The introduction of self-management was in this way perceived by the teachers as a direct symbolic attack on their own authority. This may explain why they found their own middle way through the forms of self-management set by Narkompros. Thus, the discursive result of the contradiction between the administrative necessity and the internal unacceptability of an expansion of children's agency that faced teachers, was the normalisation of manipulative behaviour. One example is the 'tactful leadership' which became a stereotypical phrase in pedagogical literature applied to children's meetings from the beginning of the 1930s and came into wide currency after the war. Successful manipulations had to be imperceptible.

The historical outcome of the experiment in introducing self-management into Soviet schools in the 1920s, and of the discussion about the limits of children's agency that accompanied it, was the expansion of a disciplinary model (well-known from canonical Soviet pedagogy and everyday school life) in which the teacher, assisted by the class collective, manipulated individual children. In other words, the forms of school self-management proposed by Narkompros, which the teachers regarded as an attack on their own authority, were adapted by them to acquire yet another means of objectivising children.

It must be admitted that Soviet pedagogues are not the only example of such a perversion of the idea of children's autonomy. Researchers who have conducted a critical analysis of the ideology of reforming pedagogy of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries connected with stimulating children's autonomy in both the educational and disciplinary spheres have shown that the potential for manipulation by adults was often the hidden agenda of the 'new pedagogy', even though most often its proponents were not aware of it. Thus, the establishment of behavioural norms as a consequence of the tenor of school life as a whole opens the field of manipulation by camouflaging the source of these norms and thereby reducing the possibilities of individual resistance [Pongratz 2007: 39]. Another example is the project method of teaching promoted by the followers of Dewey and also adopted in Soviet schools in the 1920s. Project-based teaching assumes that the teacher is the bearer of a hidden agenda which consists in the organisation of the learning process in such a way that the children reach by themselves the goals which (s)he has planned for them [Holt 1994: 80].¹

¹ The extent to which the formulations of American pedagogues of the 1920s writing about the role of the teacher in project-based teaching resemble the puppet metaphors of Soviet pedagogues writing about the teacher's tasks in organising school self-management is remarkable: '[I]t is essential that the teacher <...> be a tactful leader rather than a dictator, an engineer who gives momentum to the purpose by skilful <...> maneuvers in the background, from which she appears only when needed' [Jones 1922: 498, cited from Holt 1994: 80].

During the contemporary discussion about agency, much has been written about the reasons why talking about children's agency is problematic. Some of these are problematic not because they lead to an incorrect interpretation of the historical or anthropological material, but because of the discursive side effects that may arise when they are used. Thus, if agency is used as a binary category or not enough effort is put into seeking varied and multidimensional evidence for children's agency, that may only reinforce the perception of children as the 'dumb witnesses' of history [Gleason 2016]. The model of the autonomous subject on which the category of agency is based can lead to the blame for negative social effects being shifted onto the children themselves [Vandenbroeck, Bie 2006]. Moreover, outside academic discourse adults are only ready to acknowledge children's agency if their behaviour is normative and, from their point of view, rational, rejecting the agency of children involved in socially deprecated activities [Bordonaro, Payne 2012]. This last principle seems quite universal and may be clearly traced in the position of those Soviet pedagogues who were ready to acknowledge children's agency in school self-management only if the children's activities corresponded to pedagogical expectations.

It seems to me that from the results of the analysis of the discussion about school self-management in Soviet Russia in the 1920s, although this did not use the word 'agency', one can add another side effect to the list. If there is a need to bring about children's agency in 'adult' institutional forms, and if the agency of the child may in this context be perceived as an attack on the traditional authority of the adult who is in an institutional relationship with children in one sphere or another, this may lead to the result known from historical experience: the normalisation of manipulation of children both in discourse and in practice.

Abbreviations

TsGA SPb — Central State Archive of St Petersburg

Archival materials

TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 1. Minutes of the meetings of the school pedagogical council (1918–9).

TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 13. Minutes of the meetings of the presidium of the school council (1922–3).

TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 29. Minutes of the meetings of the school pedagogical council (1924–5).

TsGA SPb, f. R-787, op. 1, d. 39. Minutes of the meetings of the school-pedagogical council (1926).

TsGA SPb, f. R-2552, op. 1, d. 2079. Circular of the Leningrad Provincial Department of Public Education on self-management in schools and on the organisation of school-pupil self-management (1925).

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