

Bureaucratic Neutralization: Structural Limits of Democratic Pedagogy in Centralized Educational Systems

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ABSTRACT

Democratic pedagogy and human rights education have become widely accepted objectives of contemporary educational policy. Yet, despite their strong normative legitimacy, reforms promoting participation, inclusion, and democratic citizenship continue to encounter persistent structural constraints within centralized educational systems. While existing scholarship has examined educational reproduction, bureaucratic governance, and critical pedagogy, less attention has been devoted to explaining how democratic reforms are institutionally accommodated without fundamentally transforming existing relations of power.

This conceptual article addresses this gap by introducing the concept of bureaucratic neutralization, defined as the institutional process through which democratic pedagogical initiatives are translated into standardized administrative procedures, accountability mechanisms, and managerial practices that preserve bureaucratic stability while limiting their emancipatory potential. Drawing upon critical pedagogy, the sociology of education, and theories of bureaucracy, the article develops an integrated analytical framework that explains how centralization, standardization, performativity, and organizational routines reshape democratic education into administratively manageable practice.

The article argues that the principal obstacle to democratic pedagogy lies not in the absence of democratic ideals but in the institutional capacity of centralized educational systems to absorb educational innovation without altering their underlying organizational logic. By conceptualizing this process as bureaucratic neutralization, the study offers a new perspective on the relationship between democratic reform, educational governance, and institutional reproduction, while providing a theoretical framework for future research on democratic education in centralized educational systems.

Keywords: Democratic Pedagogy; Bureaucratic Neutralization; Sociology of Education; Human Rights Education; Critical Pedagogy; Educational Governance.

INTRODUCTION

Democratic pedagogy and human rights education have become central normative principles of contemporary educational policy. International organizations, national curricula, and educational reforms increasingly promote democratic participation, inclusion, critical citizenship, and respect for human rights as fundamental educational objectives (Biesta, 2011; Osler & Starkey, 2010). More recently, UNESCO (2021) has reaffirmed this democratic mission by presenting education as the foundation of a new social contract capable of addressing contemporary global challenges. Nevertheless, despite this broad normative consensus, democratic educational reforms continue to encounter persistent institutional constraints within centralized educational systems. Across diverse national contexts, initiatives designed to promote participation, school autonomy, and democratic governance frequently become absorbed into bureaucratic routines, standardized procedures, and accountability mechanisms, thereby limiting their transformative potential. This contradiction has been widely acknowledged across several fields of educational research. Critical pedagogy has examined education as a site of emancipation and domination, the sociology of education has analysed the reproduction of inequality

through institutional structures, and studies of bureaucracy and educational governance have explored the growing influence of performativity, managerialism, and administrative control (Ball, 2003; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2024; Weber et al., 1978). Although these perspectives have generated significant insights, they have generally addressed different dimensions of the problem without fully explaining the institutional processes through which democratic reforms become incorporated into bureaucratic educational systems while losing much of their transformative capacity. This article argues that this unresolved question requires a different conceptual perspective. It introduces the concept of bureaucratic neutralization to explain how centralized educational systems preserve the language and legitimacy of democratic reform while translating democratic initiatives into administratively manageable practices compatible with existing organizational structures. In doing so, the article seeks to explain why democratic pedagogy is frequently institutionalized without fundamentally altering established relations of governance, authority, and educational practice. The article makes two principal contributions to the sociology of education. First, it develops bureaucratic neutralization as a new conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between democratic pedagogy and bureaucratic governance. Second, it integrates critical pedagogy, the sociology of education, and theories of bureaucracy into a common analytical model capable of explaining the structural limits of democratic educational reform within centralized educational systems. Methodologically, the study adopts a critical-conceptual approach that synthesizes these theoretical traditions in order to develop an original explanatory framework rather than an empirical case study. The central research question guiding this article is therefore the following: How do centralized educational systems preserve the legitimacy of democratic educational reforms while simultaneously limiting their transformative potential? The article argues that this apparent paradox can be explained through the concept of bureaucratic neutralization, understood as the institutional process through which democratic reforms are incorporated into bureaucratic governance without fundamentally altering existing relations of authority and organizational control.

This work is qualitative research and specifically a case study, as the in-depth study of an immeasurable socio-educational project was sought, where the theoretical framework and the perspective from which we approach childhood, education, teachers, knowledge, learning and community will be constructed. This methodological construction follows a targeted three-stage logic:

(a) Identification of structural blind spots, as alternative discourses such as the Critical Pedagogy movement often operate on the basis of political determinism and tend to degrade education, there is a risk that education will be completely dependent and subordinated to specific political and ideological agendas (Pechtelidis, 2020), while at the same time the revisions should take into account, very realistically, the obstacles and limits that characterize the school institution (Bourdieu, 2004).

(b) Mapping overlapping institutional dynamics, such as the spread of an “audit culture” based on the quantification of educational data, the achievement of defined measurable goals and the establishment of technologies of surveillance, enforcement and accountability, combined with social “habitus”, i.e. the internalized social norms and beliefs, which consolidate mental patterns in people, which aim to legitimize and reproduce the status quo (Pasias et al., 2015).

(c) Integrating these mechanisms into a model of bureaucratic neutralization, where the processes of control and legitimization of school knowledge are part of the bureaucratic, administrative and managerial structures through which specific perceptions are imposed (Pasias et al., 2015).

This systematic unification offers a conceptual scheme that potentially transcends the dilemma posed by the relationship between structure and the intentional action of subjects and enables us to examine the interaction between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic assemblages of discourses and practices, constituting a theoretical bridge as politics is simultaneously macro-political and micro-political (Pechtelidis, 2020).

In Greece, the administration follows the Napoleonic system, which is characterized by centralization, emphasis on legality rather than efficiency and long, bureaucratic recruitment and promotion procedures (Tsiliki, 2025). Regional and local authorities implement the orders of the central power without developing initiatives, while few substantive administrative responsibilities have been transferred to the school unit level.

At the same time, in the curricula of many countries there is extensive discussion about the democratic school, active citizenship and related goals of shaping democratic consciousness and active democratic citizens (Katsarou, 2020). Finally, as this research is a case study, the generalization of the results to other social groups or countries is limited offering instead analytical generalization that is, contributing theoretical understanding.

Democratic Pedagogy, Bureaucracy and the Limits of Existing Explanations

Democratic pedagogy has long been understood as an educational project oriented toward emancipation, democratic participation, and the cultivation of critical citizenship. Across different intellectual traditions, education is conceived not as a neutral process of knowledge transmission but as a social practice through which individuals learn to participate in collective life, interrogate existing power relations, and develop the capacity for democratic judgment (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2011). Despite important differences among these approaches, they share a common assumption: democratic education requires institutional conditions that allow dialogue, participation, and critical inquiry to flourish.

Within this tradition, Paulo Freire's critique of the banking model of education represents one of the most influential analyses of pedagogical domination. Freire (2005) demonstrates how conventional schooling reproduces relations of domination by positioning teachers as the exclusive holders of legitimate knowledge while reducing students to passive recipients of information. His concept of *conscientização*¹ provides a powerful explanation of how education can either reproduce or challenge existing structures of oppression. Yet Freire's analysis remains primarily concerned with pedagogical relations inside the classroom. It offers comparatively limited explanation of how democratic educational projects are reshaped by the wider organizational structures within which schooling is embedded (Freire, 2005).

A similar observation applies to the broader tradition of democratic education developed by Dewey and later expanded by Giroux. Dewey (1916) conceptualizes democracy as a mode of associated living sustained through communication, participation, and shared inquiry, while (Giroux, 2024; Giroux, 2011) argues that teachers should function as transformative intellectuals capable of fostering critical citizenship and democratic agency. Together, these perspectives establish an essential normative vision of democratic schooling. However, they devote relatively little attention to the institutional mechanisms through which bureaucratic educational systems constrain, redirect, or domesticate democratic pedagogical practices after they become incorporated into official educational policy.

The institutional dimensions of educational governance have been examined more systematically within Weberian sociology and subsequent theories of the modern state. Weber et al. (1978) demonstrated that bureaucracy derives its effectiveness from hierarchy, formal rules, administrative specialization, and organizational predictability, thereby providing the organizational stability upon which modern educational systems depend. More recent state-theoretical perspectives have further emphasized that bureaucracy should be understood not merely as an administrative apparatus but as a mode of governance through which the state coordinates, regulates, and reproduces institutional order across different policy domains (Jessop, 2016). From this perspective, educational bureaucracies constitute part of broader state governance rather than autonomous organizational systems. Nevertheless, neither Weber nor subsequent state theory fully explains why democratic educational reforms, once institutionalized, frequently become absorbed into bureaucratic routines without substantially transforming the organizational logic of schooling.

Contemporary analyses of educational governance extend Weber's insights by demonstrating how bureaucracy increasingly operates through performativity, accountability, audit cultures, and managerial forms of regulation associated with New Public Management (Ball, 2003). Educational institutions are progressively organized around measurable outcomes, standardized evaluation, and performance indicators that reshape teachers' professional practices and institutional priorities. These approaches convincingly explain the expansion of managerial governance but are less concerned with understanding why reforms explicitly designed to

¹ The word *conscientização* is a Portuguese term introduced and established by the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (in his emblematic work "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed").

strengthen democracy frequently become incorporated into the very bureaucratic structures they were intended to transform.

Critical sociology of education addresses a different dimension of the problem. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) analyse how educational institutions reproduce social inequality through symbolic violence and unequal distributions of cultural capital, while Apple (2013) demonstrates how schools contribute to the reproduction of dominant ideological relations. These perspectives reveal why educational institutions reproduce existing social orders even while presenting themselves as meritocratic and politically neutral. Yet they do not fully explain the institutional processes through which democratic educational reforms themselves become progressively accommodated within bureaucratic governance while retaining their normative legitimacy.

Taken together, these theoretical traditions illuminate complementary aspects of the relationship between education, power, and institutional governance. Critical pedagogy explains the emancipatory aspirations of democratic education; Weberian sociology explains the organizational logic of bureaucracy; studies of performativity explain contemporary technologies of governance; and critical sociology explains the reproduction of inequality. What remains insufficiently theorized, however, is the institutional process connecting these perspectives. Existing scholarship tells us why bureaucracy exists, how educational inequality is reproduced, and why democratic pedagogy matters. It tells us considerably less about how democratic educational reforms themselves are transformed after entering bureaucratic institutions.

It is precisely this analytical gap that the concept of bureaucratic neutralization seeks to address. Rather than focusing exclusively on pedagogy, bureaucracy, or educational reproduction, the concept directs attention to the institutional processes through which state educational systems preserve organizational continuity while simultaneously incorporating democratic reform. Bureaucratic neutralization refers to the process through which centralized educational systems absorb democratic reforms by translating them into administrative procedures, accountability requirements, standardized regulations, and managerial routines that preserve institutional stability while progressively limiting their emancipatory potential. Democratic discourse therefore remains institutionally visible, yet democratic practice becomes increasingly subordinated to bureaucratic forms of governance.

This perspective also helps explain why the history of democratic schooling has repeatedly produced ambivalent outcomes. Radical educational experiments such as Summerhill (Neill & Fromm, 1960) and the Sudbury model (Greenberg, 1991) demonstrated that expanding student autonomy can challenge traditional hierarchies and create genuinely participatory learning environments. At the same time, these experiences also revealed that democratic participation cannot simply be equated with the absence of institutional regulation. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) remind us, educational freedom is itself socially conditioned by unequal distributions of cultural capital. Democratic education therefore requires neither bureaucratic control nor institutional deregulation alone, but organizational arrangements capable of combining democratic participation with conditions that actively mitigate structural inequality (Fielding & Moss, 2011).

In many cases, there is a large gap between theory and reality, as the adoption of policies ends up being merely superficial compliance (Fullan, 2020). Under decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), any attempt at change that is not accompanied by a substantial transformation of structures necessarily remains virtual (Bourdieu, 2004), with the result that innovations are implemented in a cursory manner that does not yield the expected results (Elmore et al., 1996). In contrast, bureaucratic neutralization presupposes an active administrative mediation, where these procedures are part of the administrative and managerial structures of schools and educational systems, through which specific perceptions, conduct, behaviors and an ethos are imposed. Subjects are called upon to implement specific instructions and frameworks, while practices are subject to multiple and mandatory regulation. Ultimately, power seeks to influence the predispositions of subjects, making the educational process visible, transparent and comparable through standardization, measurability, performativity and effectiveness. In this light, the very existence of the institution obliges compliance according to what the institution defines (Pasiás et al., 2015).

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) reaching out to partner organisations, through soft modes of power that co-opt rather than coerce, enhances its ability to reach into local education spaces. The OECD attracts and co-opts like-minded partner agencies into promoting PISA for Schools, and, at the same time, the emergence of policy actors and organisations that apprehend possibilities for using PISA for Schools to further their own agendas (Lewis, 2020). OECD reviews lend themselves to countries' appropriation and instrumentalization hence, governments that commission a national review are likely to use the review to legitimize or advance their own agenda (Verger et al., 2019). Considerations of the justice of social life are progressively depoliticized and made into supposedly neutral puzzles that can be solved by the accumulation of neutral empirical facts (Apple, 2004). The capacity of influence of many International Organizations (IOs) depends on their ability of portraying as technical, issues that are perceived as highly political and sensitive at the national scale (Verger et al., 2018). Technical perspectives, ones taught to and used by educators as mere procedures, complement the needs of an unequal society for the maximization of the production of technical knowledge and the distribution of an acritical and positivistic perspective (Apple, 2004). From the above it follows that while co-optation relies on soft power to strategically absorb actors, international agendas and ready-made policies into governance networks, bureaucratic neutralization functions as an internal, structural transformation.

Policies are contested, interpreted and enacted in a variety of arenas of practice and the rhetorics, texts and meanings of policy makers do not always translate directly and obviously into institutional practices due to design and implementation weaknesses including overly complex designs relative to local capacities (Verger et al., 2018). The use of systems procedures assumes as its taken for granted foundation that the institutions of schooling are fundamentally sound. These value-free technical perspectives provide the solution to an elite group managers' problems, diverting attention from differences in ultimate values and from the more remote consequences of the social policies (Apple, 2004). When a democratic reform fails in practice, the classical theory assumes that the system "made a mistake" or an administrative collapse occurred and attributes the blame to technical weaknesses, poor design of laws, lack of funding, inadequate teacher training or organizational deficits. In contrast, the theory of Bureaucratic Neutralization argues that the change in the character of the reform is not due to incompetence or collapse of the mechanism, but to an extremely efficient functioning of the centralized system that adopts democratic ideas (e.g. participation, emancipation, inclusion) and translates them into technical routines, forms, evaluation indicators and bureaucratic procedures. In this way, the reform appears to be implemented, since all procedures are followed, but in reality its subversive and emancipatory power has been neutralized, leaving the power structures completely intact.

The degree of autonomy and accountability is directly linked to the professional identity of teachers (Ntentakis, 2025), as the subject of self-transcendence is inescapably integrated into the logic of effectiveness and performance with the change of the "soul" (Vartholomaïos, 2025), where the individuals are led to take responsibility for failure themselves (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). Thus, performance control is considered a political and ideological act that constitutes a technology of control and performance (Pasiás et al., 2015). On the contrary, neutralization translates the democratic values themselves into measurable results, where student-centered allusions (critical thinking, student-friendliness, dialogue, collaboration) are included in the framework of a more painless normalization, since teachers are encouraged to involve them in dialogue with the aim of always achieving this normalization. Furthermore, the reference to compliance with the Internal Regulations ultimately establishes moral normalization as an evaluation criterion, concealing the existing asymmetries of intra-school power relations and the disciplinary cybernetics of the school system, at a time when the educational landscape is filled with standards, indicators, criteria and numbers (Retalis, 2022).

Bureaucratic Neutralization as a Mechanism of Educational Reproduction

The concept of bureaucratic neutralization proposed in this article seeks to explain not why democratic educational reforms emerge, but why they so frequently fail to transform the institutional logic of centralized educational systems. Existing theories have convincingly demonstrated that schools reproduce social inequalities, bureaucracies privilege stability, and democratic pedagogy aspires to emancipation. Yet these perspectives leave insufficiently specified the institutional process through which democratic reforms, once officially adopted, gradually lose their transformative capacity without ever being formally abandoned. Bureaucratic neutralization refers precisely to this process. Rather than opposing democratic pedagogy through

explicit ideological rejection, centralized educational systems preserve their organizational coherence by incorporating democratic reforms into their existing administrative architecture. Democratic discourse is therefore maintained, institutional commitment remains publicly visible, yet the practical meaning of democratic education is progressively redefined according to bureaucratic rather than pedagogical imperatives.

For education, the discourse on improving educational systems, transforming existing structures and adapting them to the demands of the modern knowledge economy shapes the conditions for the development of new forms of educational governance, focusing, among others, on the concepts of managerialism, governmentality and performativity. The type of education and professional development of teachers promoted within the framework of international organizations and the European Union stems from the “global discourse” on quality, efficiency and effectiveness of education promoted by international organizations, and shapes a kind of “cult” of “performativity” and “quality assurance”(Ball, 2003; Connell, 2009; Gillies, 2008).

This process begins with institutional incorporation. Contemporary educational systems rarely reject democratic principles such as participation, inclusion, human rights education, or student voice. On the contrary, these principles have become integral components of international educational agendas, national legislation, curriculum frameworks, strategic policy documents, and quality assurance systems. Their incorporation strengthens the normative legitimacy of educational institutions by demonstrating responsiveness to contemporary democratic expectations. However, institutional adoption should not be confused with institutional transformation. Incorporation often represents the point at which democratic pedagogy enters bureaucratic governance, thereby becoming subject to the organizational rules through which modern educational systems maintain coherence, predictability, and administrative control.

Once incorporated, democratic principles undergo a process of bureaucratic translation. Educational ideals that initially emerge as political and pedagogical projects are reformulated into administratively manageable categories. Participation becomes consultation procedures; inclusion becomes regulatory compliance; human rights education becomes curriculum content; democratic citizenship becomes measurable learning outcomes; innovation becomes implementation guidelines. In this translation, democratic concepts are not rejected but reformulated into administrative objects that can be regulated, monitored, documented, and evaluated. Bureaucracy therefore does not eliminate democratic language; rather, it converts democratic practices into organizational procedures compatible with existing administrative routines. The political character of democratic pedagogy is progressively displaced by the technical language of implementation, coordination, and policy management. In this case, liberatory education is stripped of its political and cultural dimension and degenerates into a set of mechanical educational methods, much more reminiscent of training that, as a wish list, includes meaningless concepts such as “emancipation”, “empowerment” and “critical consciousness”, than of critical education (Vittoria, 2016). Education is primarily a political and ethical practice (Moss, 2019). This means that it is built on: (a) responses to specific political stakes, that is, issues that are the subject of confrontation in society, and (b) relationships that presuppose an ethics that guides and regulates how we relate to each other. The responses to all political issues or stakes concerning education contain a strong ethical dimension that concerns the question: “What is a good education?” According to the dominant discourse, education is primarily a technical practice that provides empirically documented answers to questions such as: “How is valid knowledge transmitted effectively?” or “What is quality knowledge and education?” etc. The increased effectiveness of the educational process is the goal. The “how?” overshadow the “why?” and the “what?” For example: How do we achieve high performance in a practice? How are order and discipline imposed? The goals and objectives are considered given and indisputable. This is an education for predetermined results, which is perceived as an investment that will yield relatively fast and economically high returns. It is an education based on the commercialized provision of services. The focus is on identifying the appropriate combination of technologies (quality) that will yield the best predetermined outcomes and on exploring how to make the educational market or childcare market work better and more efficiently (in the same) (Pechtelidis, 2020). As Biesta (2007) points out, the technocratic model seeks the effectiveness of educational means, but forgets that what is considered “effective” depends on judgments about what is educationally desirable. By raising this idea of the “educationally desirable” we immediately find ourselves in the territory of the political, as there is no right answer to the question of what is desirable or good, only a

variety of answers, some of which are conflicting. This means that we are de facto making choices between often conflicting alternatives (Moss, 2019).

This translation is reinforced by the expansion of managerial governance, through which educational institutions increasingly operate according to the logics of performativity, accountability, and numerical evaluation. Weber's organizational rationality acquires a new intensity under contemporary forms of educational governance shaped by New Public Management and governing by numbers (Ball, 2003; Madsen, 2022). Concepts such as quality, competitiveness, adaptability, efficiency, accountability, and expendability are key political-administrative terms for understanding the relationships of education with an internationalized, competitive, and constantly changing economic environment. In addition, the modern forms of techno-governance imposed at the European level are linked to the establishment of policy by numbers and the application of surveillance and control technologies in the field of education. Governing by numbers, which is based on the development of principles, rules, standards, quality criteria and indicators, measurement tools, and evaluation procedures, constitutes a distinct political and ideological act in the context of the formation of a 'market' and 'measurable' Europe of knowledge (Pasiás, 2016). Administrative authority is exercised not only through hierarchy and formal regulation but through performance indicators, quality assurance mechanisms, evaluation frameworks, strategic planning, and continuous data production. Democratic initiatives therefore become valuable primarily insofar as they generate measurable outputs capable of demonstrating institutional effectiveness. The success of educational reform is no longer evaluated according to its capacity to transform democratic relationships within schools but according to its compliance with reporting requirements, implementation targets, and performance metrics. Democratic education thus becomes increasingly intelligible through bureaucratic visibility rather than democratic experience.

According to Deleuze (1992), power relations are undergoing a fundamental transformation as we move from a disciplinary society to a society of control. Societies of control as Deleuze describes them are now largely digital. In education, children's behaviors and performance are subject to constant surveillance and control, through observation, regular examinations and tests, and the technology of endless data collection around children's performance. All of this is analyzed, processed based on the goals and specifications of power, and fed back to the educational system to be applied to children (and teachers). Contemporary knowledge policies are organized around the quantification, measurement, and evaluation of educational work and teachers (Deleuze, 1992). New forms of evaluation prevail and new forms of accountability are imposed. Criteria, indicators, monitoring, measurement and evaluation procedures are introduced with the aim of controlling the quality and increasing the effectiveness of educational work, while the role of teachers is gradually weakened and their possibilities for intervention, the scope of 'autonomy' and the 'degree of freedom' are limited (Grek, 2009; Lingard et al., 2012).

The cumulative effect of these processes extends beyond formal institutional arrangements and gradually reshapes the dispositions of educational actors themselves. Bureaucratic neutralization therefore operates not only through organizational regulation but also through the formation of bureaucratic habitus. Habitus is considered to be the set of predispositions based on which individuals act and respond to social. These predispositions are imprinted on individuals from childhood and subsequently through education and are codified in rules that are inscribed in an internal system of ideas and attitudes. Thus, habitus is not a collection of abilities and skills but characterizes a way of life, a specific attitude and behavior, through which teachers manage administrative reality. In centralized systems, constant exposure to performance and controls reshapes their practical logic, as performance control is considered a political and ideological act that constitutes a technology of **governance** and determines not only a set of values, but also a form of accountability. The entire educational landscape is filled with standards, indicators, criteria and numbers, as surveillance policies are linked to the establishment of the policy of numbers and the application of control technologies, making the educational act visible, transparent and comparable through standardization, measurability, efficiency and effectiveness circumstances (Pasiás et al., 2015). Drawing upon Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), bureaucratic governance progressively structures the practical expectations through which teachers, students, and parents interpret educational reality. Teachers increasingly reconcile democratic aspirations with organizational constraints by adapting pedagogical practice to centralized curricula, administrative workloads, and accountability requirements. Compliance becomes experienced less as external coercion than as professional

responsibility. Students similarly internalize educational success as examination performance, procedural conformity, and credential acquisition rather than democratic participation or collective deliberation. Parents frequently reinforce these orientations by evaluating schools primarily according to measurable academic outcomes and labour-market competitiveness. Bureaucratic rationality thus becomes embedded within everyday educational common sense, reproducing itself through routine institutional practice rather than continuous external enforcement.

The significance of bureaucratic neutralization lies in its capacity to explain how institutional reproduction occurs without requiring explicit ideological domination. Democratic reforms are not rendered ineffective because educational actors necessarily reject democratic values, nor because bureaucratic systems consciously seek to suppress democratic education. Rather, the organizational logic of centralized educational governance systematically redirects democratic initiatives toward forms compatible with bureaucratic stability. Democratic discourse survives, institutional innovation appears continuous, and reform remains politically visible. Yet each successive adaptation simultaneously reduces the capacity of democratic pedagogy to alter existing relations of authority, participation, and educational governance. Institutional change thus becomes organizational accommodation.

The Greek educational system illustrates this broader theoretical dynamic. During the past three decades, reforms such as the Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework (ΔΕΠΠΣ), the Flexible Zone, project-based learning initiatives, and, more recently, school self-evaluation formally embraced principles associated with democratic pedagogy, interdisciplinarity, participation, and school improvement. At the same time, however, the Greek educational system has remained one of the most highly centralized within Europe, with curriculum regulation, personnel management, and educational decision-making continuing to be exercised predominantly through central administrative structures (Eurydice, 2025; OECD, 2020). From the perspective developed in this article, this institutional configuration helps explain why democratic reforms have often been implemented through standardized procedures, reporting requirements, and accountability mechanisms rather than through a substantial redistribution of educational authority. Although employed here only as an illustrative case, the Greek experience demonstrates how democratic reforms may become institutionally incorporated while leaving the underlying bureaucratic architecture of schooling fundamentally intact. Similar dynamics documented across other centralized educational systems suggest that bureaucratic neutralization possesses analytical relevance beyond any single national context.

Public schools have defined standards and rules for the regulation of school daily life, the curriculum, the architecture and the arrangement of space and time, which are imposed by the state and the competent ministry. Regarding the social organization of the school space, the harsh disciplinary institutionalization is dominant, which means that classification and demarcations are very strong (Pechtelidis, 2020). In recent years, technological progress, the information society, internationalization and the dominance of the market economy have profoundly affected education. Educational systems are trying to adapt to this new framework, which shapes educational policies and affects all the groups involved (Ball, 2012). In Greece, the educational system is characterized by a centralized model with decentralization tendencies, which determines the role of teachers and school units. The school unit, as a living cell of the educational process, plays a decisive role in shaping tomorrow's citizens. However, teachers and school units exercise centrally determined educational policy, which limits their ability to shape independent educational policy. At the same time, the education sector, as an important interest group, seeks to influence the shaping of educational policies and to claim a role that corresponds to the nature of the profession (Ntentakis, 2025).

Understanding bureaucratic neutralization in these terms also helps clarify why educational reproduction should not be interpreted as a static or mechanically deterministic process. Bureaucratic incorporation remains inherently incomplete because every attempt to standardize democratic practice simultaneously generates tensions between organizational regulation and pedagogical autonomy. The very contradictions produced by bureaucratic governance create spaces in which educators, students, and local school communities continue to negotiate, reinterpret, and occasionally resist institutional expectations. Bureaucratic neutralization should therefore be understood not as the elimination of democratic possibility but as the structural mechanism through which centralized educational systems continuously seek to stabilize democratic reform by translating political transformation into administrative order. Precisely because this translation can never be entirely

complete, democratic pedagogy retains the potential to re-emerge within the contradictions of bureaucratic governance itself.

Bureaucratic neutralization provides a conceptual bridge between critical pedagogy, theories of educational reproduction, and the sociology of bureaucracy, demonstrating how democratic education may be simultaneously promoted, administered, and structurally constrained within the very institutions that officially endorse it. In order to combat the strengthening of educational discrimination, the central authority should provide the most disadvantaged individuals and institutions with guarantees that are clear, effective and ensure for all the common cultural minimum, which is the necessary condition both for the exercise of a successful professional activity and for the maintenance of the communicative minimum that is necessary for the correct and enlightened exercise of human rights and civil rights (Bourdieu, 2004). Bureaucratic neutralization, instead of being hostile, can become a tool of democracy and defense of the various groups of students, incorporating democratic elements that the struggles of the peoples have managed to impose in the institution of education, such as, for example, an egalitarian legal framework and the discourse on the rights of the child (Pechtelidis, 2020).

Democratic Pedagogy Under Conditions of Bureaucratic Governance

The analysis developed in the preceding sections suggests that the principal challenge confronting democratic pedagogy is not the absence of progressive educational ideals but the institutional environment within which these ideals are required to operate. If bureaucratic neutralization constitutes a structural mechanism through which centralized educational systems absorb and domesticate democratic reforms, then the success or failure of democratic pedagogy cannot be explained solely by the quality of pedagogical methods, teachers' professional commitment, or the normative content of educational policy. Rather, democratic education must be understood as institutionally conditioned. Its emancipatory potential depends upon the organizational distribution of authority, the degree of professional autonomy available to educators, and the capacity of educational institutions to sustain spaces of democratic deliberation beyond bureaucratic regulation.

This perspective fundamentally repositions democratic pedagogy within the sociology of education. Democratic education should no longer be conceived primarily as an instructional methodology that can simply be inserted into otherwise unchanged institutional environments. Classroom dialogue, participatory learning, project-based instruction, and human rights education undoubtedly remain pedagogically valuable. Nevertheless, when implemented within organizational structures governed by centralized decision-making, standardized accountability, and managerial regulation, these practices become vulnerable to the very processes of bureaucratic neutralization. Their educational value is progressively redefined according to administrative rather than democratic criteria. Consequently, the effectiveness of democratic pedagogy depends not only upon pedagogical innovation but upon the institutional conditions governing educational practice.

From this perspective, teacher agency acquires renewed theoretical significance. Critical pedagogy has traditionally portrayed teachers as transformative intellectuals capable of cultivating democratic citizenship and critical consciousness (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2024). The present analysis does not reject this proposition; rather, it situates it within the broader institutional dynamics of bureaucratic governance. Teachers should not be understood as autonomous agents capable of overcoming structural constraints solely through personal commitment or pedagogical creativity. Such an interpretation risks reducing structural problems to questions of individual professionalism. Instead, teachers occupy a contradictory institutional position. They simultaneously function as agents of the educational bureaucracy responsible for implementing centralized policy and as professional actors capable of interpreting, mediating, and occasionally redefining institutional expectations within everyday educational practice. Their democratic agency therefore emerges not outside bureaucratic governance but within its contradictions.

In their attempt to manage the institutional framework, teachers often indirectly modify/change, that is, interpret as they wish, legislative texts related to teaching and adapt them to their own capabilities, proceeding to covert violations of the norm in order to protect themselves from surveillance (Ntentakis, 2025). This action develops within an audit culture and a corporate management system (Martinez, 2011), which imposes a

performativity and accountability culture (Gleeson & Husbands, 2001). However, the general administrative autonomy is limited due to the centralized management model in Greece, which undermines professional flexibility (OECD, 2019), with the system treating the educator as a typical process operator. Under these circumstances, democratization remains virtual and reform proposals often amount to a rhetoric of a limited and fragmented nature, as teachers remain trapped in bureaucratic, administrative and managerial structures that impose specific perceptions and ethos (Bourdieu, 2004).

Recognizing this contradiction also requires a broader reconceptualization of educational governance itself. If bureaucratic neutralization operates by translating democratic aspirations into administratively manageable procedures, then strengthening democratic education cannot be achieved merely by introducing additional curricular innovations or expanding teacher training programmes. Democratic reform requires institutional arrangements that redistribute educational authority rather than simply diversify pedagogical techniques. Questions concerning school autonomy, participatory governance, professional discretion, collaborative decision-making, and the relationship between central administration and local educational communities therefore become intrinsic components of democratic pedagogy itself rather than external administrative concerns (Gutmann, 1999).

This institutional perspective resonates with recent philosophical reconsiderations of the democratic purposes of education (Biesta, 2011). Biesta (2022) further argues that education should not be reduced to the efficient production of predetermined learning outcomes or measurable competencies but should remain oriented toward encounters with plurality, uncertainty, and democratic responsibility. Democratic education, in this sense, cannot be fully specified through standardized objectives because its educational significance lies precisely in creating conditions under which individuals learn to exist with others in a shared and unpredictable world. Bureaucratic governance, by contrast, seeks to minimize uncertainty through regulation, predictability, and measurable performance. The tension between democratic pedagogy and bureaucratic administration therefore reflects two fundamentally different conceptions of education itself: one centred upon openness, judgment, and democratic subject formation, the other upon organizational coordination, accountability, and administrative control.

The argument developed here also suggests that democratic participation should not be equated with the mere formal inclusion of students or teachers within existing administrative procedures. As Fielding and Moss (2011) have argued, democratic schools require institutional relationships characterized by shared authority, collective responsibility, and genuine deliberation rather than symbolic participation. Bureaucratic neutralization demonstrates why participation frequently becomes procedural rather than transformative. Once participation is organized primarily through standardized regulations, reporting obligations, and centrally prescribed institutional frameworks, democratic engagement risks becoming another administrative requirement instead of a process through which educational communities collectively negotiate the purposes of schooling. The challenge is therefore not simply to increase participation but to preserve its political and deliberative character within bureaucratically organized institutions (hooks, 1994).

These considerations also illuminate the limits of contemporary educational reform. Across many centralized educational systems, successive reforms have sought to strengthen democratic citizenship, inclusion, intercultural education, and human rights through curriculum revision, policy frameworks, and accountability measures. Such reforms frequently encounter structural limitations because they attempt to democratize educational outcomes without simultaneously democratizing educational governance. Bureaucratic neutralization does not arise from inadequate implementation but from the organizational capacity of centralized systems to accommodate innovation while preserving their underlying distribution of authority. Democratic pedagogy therefore cannot be understood independently of broader institutional transformations concerning governance, organizational autonomy, and the democratization of educational decision-making.

Ultimately, the concept of bureaucratic neutralization redirects attention from pedagogical techniques toward institutional design. It suggests that the central question confronting democratic education is not simply how teachers should teach democratic values, but how educational institutions themselves may become capable of sustaining democratic practices without translating them into bureaucratic routines. Democratic pedagogy, therefore, should be understood less as a specialized educational method than as a particular mode of

organizing educational authority, professional responsibility, and collective participation. Only under such conditions can democratic education retain its emancipatory potential rather than becoming another administratively regulated component of bureaucratic governance.

Bureaucratic neutralization is accelerated when democratic practices are evaluated by quantitative criteria, as modern knowledge policies are organized on the basis of quantification, measurement and evaluation of educational work, where this technocratic rationality of the assessment of indicators and criteria and the imposition of accounting controls is part of panoptic surveillance (Pasiás et al., 2015). In contrast, authentic participation requires that feedback on the evaluation of assignments be carried out on the basis of critical reflection and dialogue (Giroux, 2011). The professional autonomy of teachers acts as a moderating variable for maintaining the emancipatory orientation, when teachers are called upon to transform from passive executors or simple co-managers of educational policy into critical intellectuals (transformative intellectuals). The cultivation of collaborative structures based on trust, reciprocity, shared decision-making and collective organizational learning allows the liberating nature of innovations to be maintained (Pasiás et al., 2015). Bureaucratic neutralization is radically limited when the real transfer of power to the base is legally guaranteed, as interdisciplinarity and supra-disciplinarity are inconceivable without decentralization of power, democratic administration and the effective autonomy of the school (Gadotti, 2017). In order for reforms not to be simply an alternative form of normalization and reduction of resistance, students need to be entrusted with real power, to be able to make authentic decisions (Retalis, 2022), making governance a common cause, which is equally co-managed by all members (adults and children) of the educational community (Pechtelidis, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article has argued that the persistent tension between democratic pedagogy and centralized educational systems cannot be adequately understood through existing theories of critical pedagogy, educational reproduction, or bureaucratic governance when these perspectives are considered in isolation. Although each tradition illuminates important dimensions of the relationship between education, power, and inequality, the analysis developed here has sought to explain a more specific problem: how democratic educational reforms may remain institutionally legitimate while gradually losing much of their emancipatory and transformative capacity.

To address this conceptual gap, the article introduced bureaucratic neutralization as a sociological framework for understanding the institutional domestication of democratic pedagogy. Bureaucratic neutralization refers to the capacity of centralized educational systems to absorb democratic initiatives by translating them into administrative procedures, accountability requirements, standardized regulations, and managerial forms of governance. The significance of the concept lies in integrating critical pedagogy, Weberian bureaucracy, theories of educational reproduction, and contemporary analyses of performativity into a common explanation of institutional continuity.

The argument developed throughout the article suggests that democratic pedagogy should not be understood primarily as a pedagogical technique or curricular addition operating within otherwise unchanged institutional structures. Once democratic reform enters centralized educational systems, it becomes subject to processes of institutional incorporation, bureaucratic translation, managerial regulation, habitus formation, and organizational reproduction. The principal obstacle to democratic education therefore lies less in the absence of democratic ideals than in the organizational conditions through which educational practice is governed. Democratic education is consequently inseparable from questions concerning the distribution of authority, professional autonomy, meaningful participation, and the institutional organization of educational decision-making.

This perspective also reframes the relationship between democratic pedagogy and educational governance. Educational reforms that promote participation, inclusion, human rights education, or democratic citizenship are unlikely to achieve their emancipatory ambitions when they are implemented within highly centralized systems without altering the underlying distribution of institutional authority. At the same time, recognizing the structural character of bureaucratic neutralization does not imply that democratic transformation is impossible. Bureaucratic institutions remain contested social spaces in which educators, students, and school communities

continue to negotiate, reinterpret, and occasionally resist institutional expectations. Democratic pedagogy therefore retains its significance because it can create openings for democratic agency within its contradictions.

The present study necessarily has certain limitations. As a conceptual contribution, it does not provide empirical verification of the proposed framework. The explanatory value of bureaucratic neutralization therefore remains to be examined through comparative empirical research across different educational systems, governance models, and policy environments. Future studies may investigate how bureaucratic neutralization operates under varying degrees of administrative centralization, how teachers negotiate bureaucratic constraints in everyday professional practice, and whether democratic reforms encounter similar institutional dynamics across different national contexts. In addition, the growing influence of digital educational platforms, algorithmic governance, artificial intelligence, and data-driven accountability raises important questions concerning the future transformation of bureaucratic control in education.

Ultimately, the contribution of this article lies in proposing a different way of conceptualizing the relationship between democratic education and institutional governance. By shifting attention from implementation failures toward the organizational mechanisms through which institutions regulate, reshape, and normalize reform, the concept of bureaucratic neutralization offers a new perspective on why democratic educational initiatives so often fail to realize their transformative ambitions. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates within the sociology of education concerning the conditions under which meaningful democratic transformation remains possible in increasingly bureaucratized educational systems.

The central question is therefore no longer whether democratic pedagogy is desirable, but whether contemporary educational institutions are structurally capable of sustaining democratic practice without bureaucratically neutralizing it.

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