

The Suspension of Self-Evaluative Authority: Performativity, Audit, and the Politics of Recognition in Education

Shuai Sun

University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, USA

Abstract

This paper argues that both teachers and students in contemporary education experience a suspension of evaluative authority: their own judgments of teaching and learning no longer count unless confirmed by external recognition. Drawing on two lived encounters — a teacher's pride unsettled by a colleague's award and a student's sense of learning displaced by overheard grades — the analysis shows how comparison structures educational life. The argument is developed through dialogue with Foucault on examination and visibility, Han on the performance society, and Agamben on suspension, alongside scholarship on performativity, audit cultures, and measurement. A brief genealogy traces how authority over self-judgment has been progressively displaced from premodern communities to modern examinations, psychometrics, and neoliberal audit regimes. The dynamics of recognition are then examined in terms of performance, delay, and conditional exemption, revealing how legitimacy is unevenly distributed yet structurally dependent on external confirmation. The paper concludes by considering the cost of this suspension and asking what it would mean for self-judgment to count once again. The analysis illuminates how performance-based accountability and audit regimes displace self-judgment upward, with implications for teacher autonomy and student agency.

Keywords: *suspension of evaluative authority, recognition, performativity, audit culture, judgment*

1. Introduction

A colleague's teaching award ceremony should have been a moment of simple congratulations. Yet for me it carried a sting: pride in my own teaching was suddenly displaced by comparison, as if my efforts only mattered if they, too, bore the seal of recognition. I recalled a student who once visited my office to request leave after receiving a diagnosis of breast cancer. What disturbed her most that week, however, was overhearing peers discuss their exam scores. In her email afterward she confessed that their comparisons made her own learning feel inadequate.

What connects these encounters is not merely a passing discomfort but a structural dependence on external confirmation. They reveal a recurring feature of education: self-judgments, whether a teacher's sense of good teaching or a student's sense of learning, no longer count unless confirmed by external evaluation. Recognition becomes the sole currency of legitimacy. What might look like an individual's insecurity is in fact a patterned suspension of evaluative authority. In this sense, education does not simply evaluate; it instructs us that our own evaluations do not count.

Existing scholarship has traced parts of this dynamic. Ball (2003) describes how performativity scripts teachers to align with institutional demands; Biesta (2009, 2017) highlights the takeover of education by measurement; Strathern (2000) shows how audit cultures extend into everyday practice. Meanwhile, critiques of grading have long highlighted the anxieties and distortions that numerical scores produce for students (Kohn 2013; Blum 2020). Rather than being merely individual reactions, these anxieties reveal how students' sense of worth is tied to the metrics that institutions recognize. This concern echoes critiques of

standardization and performative accountability in U.S. schooling (Taubman 2009) and aligns with research highlighting how grading practices shape students' motivation and learning orientations (Feldman 2019; Stommel 2023). Yet these accounts remain largely separate: one focused on the teacher, the other on the student.

In this paper I bring the two together through the notion of suspension of evaluative authority. By reading teacher and student experiences as mirrors of the same evaluative logic, I argue that education systematically displaces self-judgment and binds legitimacy to external confirmation. What appears as celebration or disappointment, pride or shame, is better seen as the recursive inoperation of self-evaluative authority — that is, the patterned suspension of teachers' and students' own capacity to make their judgments count unless ratified by external recognition. Framing the problem this way highlights a common structural predicament rather than separate teacher- or student-side issues, and makes visible what it would take for self-judgment to become authoritative again. It is not merely that education evaluates; it teaches us that our own evaluations do not count.

2. The Phenomenology of Comparison

The dynamics of recognition — whether in the form of awards, evaluations, or grades — can be approached most clearly at the level of lived experience. Rather than beginning with theory, I start here with a phenomenological attention to how comparison appears to those who live it. What follows are two such encounters — one my own as a faculty member, the other that of a student — that reveal how self-judgment becomes displaced. Taken together, they illuminate how comparison is not merely a private feeling but the experiential surface of a deeper structural logic.

2.1 Teacher's Experience

The moment of my colleague's teaching award was not unique. Each year, institutions celebrate faculty through ceremonies, newsletters, and public announcements. For many, these rituals pass as benign recognition. For me, however, they exposed a fissure between how I evaluated my own teaching and how that evaluation was made to count. In the weeks before the announcement, I had felt a sense of accomplishment: I had redesigned a course, invested in active learning, and seen students respond with greater engagement. By my own compass, these changes marked success: they embodied what I valued as teaching. Yet when confronted with the image of another's recognition—two awards, a feature in the college bulletin—my self-assessment collapsed. What I had judged "enough" was suddenly reclassified as "less than." Recognition required not the quiet evidence of daily practice—redesigned assignments, student discussions that stretched longer than class time—but the spectacular visibility of institutional approval.

The dissonance was not only emotional. It revealed how my judgment of good teaching was suspended until validated by an external body. I could affirm my own growth, but that affirmation lacked legitimacy; it carried no weight beyond the private domain. In that moment, what surfaced was not simply envy but the displacement of authority over judgment itself.

2.2 Student's Experience

What I later lived as a teacher, I had already glimpsed years earlier in a student. She visited my office to request leave after learning she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. The weight of the diagnosis was palpable; her body shook as she explained the treatments ahead. I expected her concerns to center on health, time, and survival. Yet what she later wrote in an email surprised me. What unsettled her most that week, she confessed, was overhearing classmates compare exam scores as she left my office. Even as her body absorbed the

shock of illness, her mind remained tethered to the comparative logic of grades. The magnitude of her diagnosis did not eclipse the smaller drama of scores; instead, it made visible how inescapable the pull of comparison had become. The encounter revealed the same disjunction I later recognized in myself. The student knew she had studied, learned, and persevered under extraordinary conditions. By any reasonable account, that should have been enough. Yet her sense of adequacy was immediately suspended when confronted with the comparative logic of grades. Like my pride in teaching, her confidence in learning carried no authority unless confirmed externally. The legitimacy of her self-judgment dissolved in the face of numbers spoken by others—a dissolution that, years later, I would experience in my own role as teacher.

2.3 Mirror Relation

Taken together, these two experiences — one my own, the other my student's — illustrate more than parallel moments of insecurity. They expose a structural logic at work in education. Whether in the form of faculty awards or student grades, recognition operates as the decisive currency of legitimacy. My sense of good teaching and her sense of having learned were both rendered insufficient until validated by external markers.

The resemblance is not accidental. Teachers and students occupy different positions in the educational hierarchy, yet both find their authority to judge themselves suspended in the same way. What I encountered as disappointment in the face of another's recognition, she encountered as anxiety in the shadow of grades. In both cases, the lived experience was not simply of failing, but of being rendered inadequate by the very act of comparison. The compass of self-judgment, however carefully cultivated, was displaced and made dependent on external confirmation. What appeared as weakness was in fact the operation of a system that suspends the force of self-evaluation.

This mirroring is crucial. It does not only mark similarity but reveals a structure that binds teachers and students alike. Evaluation is not simply a matter of how institutions measure performance; it is the process by which subjects are compelled to relinquish their own judgments. To recognize the suspension of evaluative authority in both roles is to see education itself as organized around the displacement of self-judgment — a recursive logic that reaches across the hierarchy and prepares the ground for the theoretical analysis that follows.

3. The Suspension of Evaluative Authority

The preceding phenomenological accounts reveal a recurrent pattern: both teachers and students find that their own evaluations do not carry authority until recognized by others. This section turns from lived experience to conceptual analysis. To make sense of this dynamic we draw on several theoretical perspectives that, taken together, show how power in education operates less by prescribing what to think than by suspending the authority of self-judgment.

3.1 Theoretical Anchors

To frame this displacement of self-judgment, we draw on three strands of critical thought. Studies of visibility and the examination illuminate how the authority to judge oneself becomes bound to external recognition (Foucault 2012); analyses of the performance society highlight how the demand for recognition is increasingly internalized (Han 2015, 2017); and Agamben's account of suspension shows how power may act not by abolishing the authority to judge oneself but by holding its efficacy in abeyance until another authority activates or recognizes it (Agamben 1998, 2005).

3.1.1 Foucault: Examination and Visibility

Foucault (2012) reminds us that the examination is never a neutral tool. It produces visibility, fixing individuals within a comparative grid where value exists only by being measured against others. The teacher who feels inadequate without awards, and the student who doubts herself without grades, are not merely insecure; they are inscribed into a system in which their judgments carry no authority until made legible through the institutional gaze. The examination does not simply register learning or teaching; it suspends the force of private judgment, making it valid only when rendered visible.

3.1.2 Han: The Performance Society

Han (2015, 2017) extends this dynamic into the conditions of contemporary life. In the performance society, comparison is no longer only imposed from outside but willingly embraced. Individuals internalize the demand for visibility and drive themselves toward exhaustion in pursuit of recognition. The award ceremony and the overheard grades are not just moments of external surveillance; they are moments in which subjects themselves seek confirmation, measuring their worth not by inner standards but by the gaze of others. Suspension here operates through complicity: people accept that their self-judgments do not count unless validated externally, and they work tirelessly to produce that validation.

3.1.3 Agamben: Suspension as a Mode of Power

Agamben (1998, 2005), writing in another register, offers a way to understand the structural move at stake. Power does not always operate by creating rules; it also operates by suspending them, holding individuals in a state where their inherent authority is set aside. In education, something similar occurs: the authority to judge oneself is not abolished but suspended, left intact yet stripped

of effect. The student's or teacher's own assessments persist, but they remain inoperative until external recognition intervenes.

3.2 Closing Reflection: From Theory to Structure

Read together, these perspectives disclose a common structure. Foucault (2012) shows how regimes of visibility render private judgment powerless unless it is made legible to institutions. Han (2015, 2017) reveals that the demand for recognition is no longer merely imposed from outside but willingly embraced by subjects themselves. Agamben (1998, 2005) clarifies that it is not the authority to judge oneself that is abolished but its efficacy that is suspended, leaving individuals able to speak yet without effect until their judgments are ratified by institutional power. Taken together, these insights recast what may seem like private insecurity as a patterned effect of educational power and prepare the ground for examining how such suspension is enacted in concrete educational practices.

4. Dialogues with Scholarship: Mechanisms of Suspension

The theoretical anchors above clarify the structural logic of suspension. To see how this logic operates in practice, we can turn to existing scholarship that has examined specific institutional mechanisms. These studies, though often focused on separate issues such as performativity, audit, measurement, or grading, can be read together as analyses of how self-judgment is displaced. The following subsections trace several of these mechanisms, showing how they translate the abstract logic of suspension into everyday educational routines.

4.1 Visibility: Performativity and Audit

One of the clearest mechanisms through which evaluative authority is suspended is the demand for visibility. Ball (2003)'s account of performativity

shows how teachers are compelled to translate their professional judgments into forms that can be publicly recognized: metrics, reports, and awards. The teacher's sense that a lesson has gone well, or that students have grown in understanding, does not count on its own; it must be rendered visible through outcomes that can circulate in institutional discourse. In this way, professional judgment is not erased but stripped of force until it becomes legible to external observers. Strathern (2000)'s analysis of audit cultures extends this logic. In environments dominated by accountability, what cannot be recorded does not exist. Audit requires a trace — scores, rubrics, annual reports — before value can be acknowledged. Building on this, recent analyses of global accountability regimes, such as the use of PISA in cross-national comparison, have shown how they intensify the demand for visibility and comparability (Sellar, Rutkowski, and Thompson 2017). The very act of recording suspends the authority of private assessment: a teacher may know that a student has made progress, or a student may feel they have learned, but until that judgment is captured in a visible form, it carries no legitimacy. Taken together, these accounts reveal visibility as a central technique of suspension. Self-judgments are not denied outright; they remain, but they are rendered inoperative until transposed into the formats demanded by audit and performativity. What is lost is not the capacity to judge, but the authority of that judgment to stand without external confirmation.

4.2 Measurement and Delay

A second mechanism of suspension operates through the temporal logic of measurement. Biesta (2009, 2017) has argued that in an age of measurement, the worth of education is increasingly reduced to what can be counted. This dynamic has been described as a paradigmatic instance of governmentality in education (Simons and Masschelein 2008). Learning is recognized not in the moment of its occurrence but only after it is rendered into measurable

outcomes. The student's felt sense of growth, or the teacher's perception of a lesson's success, is suspended until scores, evaluations, or outcome data confirm it. This delay is not incidental. It is structural to the way measurement functions. Examinations, standardized tests, and assessment cycles create a temporal gap between experience and recognition. During that gap, self-judgments are placed "on hold": they may exist, but they carry no institutional authority. The very act of waiting for results enacts suspension, rendering self-assessment inoperative until it has been ratified by external data. In this light, Biesta (2009, 2017)'s critique of measurement can be read as more than a warning about instrumentalism. It shows how the logic of measurement systematically suspends the authority of self-judgment, binding legitimacy to delayed confirmation. The consequence is a displacement of immediacy: learning and teaching may be lived as meaningful in the present, but they only "count" once measured in the future.

4.3 Comparability and Ranking

Suspension also takes shape through the logic of comparability. Evaluation rarely operates in isolation; its force comes from placing individuals alongside one another. Ball (2003) notes that performativity depends on constant benchmarking, positioning teachers against colleagues and students against peers. What matters is not whether a student feels she has learned, but whether her score surpasses others; not whether a teacher recognizes growth in practice, but whether that growth is visible in relation to others through awards or rankings.

This comparative structure displaces vertical self-assessment with horizontal competition. A student who knows she has made progress, or a teacher who feels a course is stronger than before, finds that judgment overridden unless it translates into a higher position on a comparative scale. Growth in depth becomes inoperative when legitimacy is tied to relative standing.

Comparability thus functions as a mechanism of suspension by binding value to competitive relations. It compels subjects to see themselves through the measure of others, rendering internal evaluations provisional until situated within a hierarchy of winners and losers.

4.4 Hierarchy and the Displacement of Professional Judgment

A final mechanism of suspension lies in the hierarchical displacement of authority. Educational evaluation rarely rests with the individual most directly involved. For students, judgments of their own learning are structurally suspended until validated by teachers' grades and expectations. The classic "expectancy effect" illustrates this dynamic: students often perform in line with what teachers anticipate, not because their own sense of learning lacks force, but because that self-judgment cannot stand without external confirmation (Rosenthal and Jacobson 2003). Critics of grading have long emphasized this displacement. Kohn (2013) argues that grades train students to seek approval rather than pursue understanding, while Stommel (2023) and Feldman (2019) highlight how grading systems generate anxiety and inequity. In each case, the student's compass is present but inoperative, awaiting recognition from the teacher's evaluative authority.

Teachers, in turn, experience a parallel suspension. As Biesta (2009, 2017) has argued, the professional judgment of educators is increasingly subordinated to external standards and accountability measures. Awards committees, assessment offices, and audit regimes strip private assessments of force, granting legitimacy only when practices align with institutional scripts. Authority thus moves upward: from student to teacher, from teacher to institution, in a recursive process that ensures no individual judgment can stand on its own.

Hierarchy, then, is not merely a social arrangement but a mechanism of suspension. By continually displacing authority upward, it renders each level of

judgment partial and dependent, never able to count on its own until ratified by the next authority above it.

4.5 Manufactured Scarcity

Another mechanism of suspension lies in the way institutions manufacture scarcity. Awards and grades appear to be scarce resources, though the teaching and learning they signify are not. In faculty life, the impact of teaching may extend across hundreds of students, yet that abundance is compressed into a handful of awards each year. The result is that a teacher's sense of accomplishment remains suspended until it can be translated into one of these rare tokens of recognition. Among students, the same logic applies: learning is abundant and multifaceted, but its worth is condensed into numerical scores and percentile rankings. Even when many students make progress, only a few can occupy the top of the curve.

This scarcity logic extends beyond awards and scores. Opportunities for research funding, selective programs, prestigious titles, or even access to meaningful learning experiences are framed as limited slots, despite the fact that the underlying capacities for inquiry, teaching, or reflection are not inherently scarce. By compressing the richness of educational practice into a few externally allocated tokens, institutions ensure that legitimacy feels rare and must be competed for.

Scarcity, in this light, is not a natural condition but a manufactured horizon that compels comparison. By reducing the richness of teaching and learning into narrow distributions of winners and losers, the system ensures that self-judgment remains suspended until it can be validated by scarce markers. This dynamic resonates with the broader historical account offered by Jonsson and Wennerlind (2023), who show that scarcity itself has long been shaped as a political-economic construct rather than a simple natural limit. By concentrating recognition and legitimacy in a few hands, educational institutions reproduce

this historical pattern, making scarcity one of the mechanisms through which evaluative authority is displaced and external recognition becomes the sole arbiter of legitimacy.

4.6 Closing Reflection: Mechanisms of Suspension

Read together, these dialogues with existing scholarship reveal a consistent pattern. Ball (2003)'s account of performativity and Strathern (2000)'s analysis of audit cultures show how the demand for visibility suspends private judgment until it is made legible to external observers. Biesta (2009, 2017)'s critique of measurement highlights the temporal delay through which judgments are held in abeyance until results are produced. Comparative logics transform vertical self-assessment into horizontal ranking, while hierarchical displacement moves authority ever upward — from student to teacher, from teacher to institution. Finally, manufactured scarcity compresses the abundance of teaching and learning into artificially limited tokens such as awards or grades, ensuring that legitimacy always feels rare and externally bestowed.

Each of these mechanisms describes a distinct way in which evaluative authority is suspended, yet they converge on the same structural outcome: self-judgments are not denied, but rendered inoperative until translated into forms recognized by external power. What Ball, Biesta, and Strathern analyze from different vantage points can be seen as facets of a single process. The contribution of this paper is to name that process as the suspension of evaluative authority and to extend it across roles. By reading teacher and student experiences as mirrors of the same evaluative logic, the analysis shows that suspension is not confined to one level of education but recursive across the hierarchy. Teachers and students alike retain the capacity to judge themselves, yet that capacity does not “count” until it is confirmed from outside. Evaluation, in this light, is not only a practice of measurement but a systematic displacement of authority over judgment itself.

5. A Genealogy of Suspension

The mechanisms of suspension did not emerge all at once. They are the layered outcome of a long historical trajectory in which the authority of self-judgment has been progressively displaced. A genealogical perspective makes it possible to see how comparison, measurement, and recognition have step by step suspended the individual's authority to evaluate learning and teaching.

5.1 Premodern Education: Community and Craft

In premodern forms of education — apprenticeships, monastic tutoring, or classical rhetorical training — evaluation was embedded in the immediacy of practice (Illich 1971; Grafton 1994). A student's sense of progress was closely aligned with recognition from a master or local community. Self-judgment still mattered, because its criteria were shared in practice: whether one could craft a tool, recite a text, or perform a skill. Suspension here was minimal; authority circulated within small, recognizable communities rather than external metrics (Illich 1971). Individual judgment had weight because it resonated with communal standards.

5.2 Modern Schooling: Standardization and Examinations

The rise of mass schooling in the nineteenth century marked a turning point (Durkheim 1956). Standardized curricula and national examinations created a system in which personal judgments of learning no longer counted until validated by official results. What mattered was not the student's felt sense of progress but their position on a scale. Suspension here became systemic: judgments were held in abeyance until the results of tests, certificates, and rankings confirmed or denied them. As Foucault (2012) notes in *Discipline and Punish*, the examination did not merely measure but constituted subjects by fixing them within a comparative grid. This competitive logic, as Labaree

(2012) argues, turned education into a zero-sum hierarchy in which legitimacy derives from outperforming others. The authority of self-assessment was thus subordinated to the authority of the exam. This historical linkage between the modern state, standardization, and comparative schooling has also been examined in Tröhler (2011).

5.3 Twentieth Century: Scientific Measurement and Psychometrics

Educational reforms in the 20th century increasingly institutionalized governance through measurement and expertise (Popkewitz 1991), paving the way for the mid-century rise of psychometrics and educational measurement. By the mid-twentieth century, the authority of self-judgment was further eroded by the rise of psychometrics and educational measurement. Intelligence tests, IQ scores, and Bloom's taxonomies sought to render learning scientifically quantifiable (Shepard 2000). Teachers themselves became subject to this logic: their judgments had to be translated into rubrics and data. In this period, suspension deepened. Both students and teachers might form their own assessments, but these remained illegitimate unless expressed through the metrics of scientific evaluation. As Tyack and Cuban (1997) argue in *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, the modern school's impulse to reform was always anchored in the promise of more precise measurement. The authority of judgment was no longer shared in practice but mediated through science.

5.4 Neoliberal Audit Cultures: Performance and Recognition

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the logic of suspension intensified under regimes of audit and performativity. For teachers, professional judgment is displaced by awards, rankings, and accountability systems; for students, self-assessment is overshadowed by GPA, standardized tests, and learning analytics. Strathern's account of audit cultures shows how metrics and records colonize everyday practice, making legitimacy dependent on visibility

(Strathern 2000). Ball describes the resulting performativity: teachers and students alike are compelled to align their actions with institutional scripts (Ball 2003). In this context, self-judgment does not disappear, but it is rendered inoperative — present but without force — unless it can be translated into forms recognized by the institution.

5.5 Closing Reflection: A Historical Trajectory of Suspension

Across these stages, we see a cumulative trajectory: from localized evaluation embedded in practice, to the systemic suspension of self-judgment through examinations, to its scientific codification, and finally to its neoliberal intensification. What was once a shared or communal authority has been displaced upward and outward, leaving both students and teachers dependent on external confirmation. Suspension is thus not an incidental feature of contemporary education, but the historical outcome of a long genealogy of evaluative power — a process that progressively strips self-judgment of authority while leaving it in place as a hollowed form.

If the genealogy reveals how suspension has been layered over time, the lived experiences of teachers and students show how it is enacted in practice.

Historical shifts crystallize into everyday dynamics: the indifference of those already recognized, the anxiety of waiting for results, and the conditional exemptions that mark privilege. To trace these dynamics is to see how the long history of suspension becomes palpable in the present, shaping how recognition is sought, felt, and withheld in educational life.

6. Recognition, Performance, and the Lived Dynamics of Suspension

The logic of suspended evaluative authority becomes most visible in the rituals of recognition that mark educational life. Consider the teaching award. At first glance, it appears as a celebration of good practice, a public acknowledgment of

excellence. Yet for those not recognized, its meaning is quite different. The award functions not only as a symbol of achievement but as a reminder that self-assessment — “I taught well, I grew, my students learned” — has no standing on its own. Until ratified through the institution’s procedures of nomination, documentation, and committee judgment, such self-assessments remain private, lacking legitimacy.

This displacement of legitimacy is not confined to the exceptional moment of award ceremonies but permeates everyday educational practice. It shapes how teachers and students come to see which of their efforts matter and which do not. In this way, recognition shifts the locus of control. Teachers and students may manage what lies within their reach — preparing lessons, studying diligently, building relationships — but the value of these efforts depends on factors outside their control: the timing of awards, the verdict of committees, or the grade assigned by another. Recognition thus operates less as a neutral marker of excellence and more as a mechanism of displacement. It reclassifies internal satisfaction as insufficient, binding value to external confirmation. In this sense, the award mirrors the function of grades for students: both translate lived experience into a form the institution can register, and both render self-judgment inoperative until that translation occurs.

6.1 Performance Logic

The performance logic produced by suspension is visible on both sides of the classroom. For students, the presence or absence of grades determines whether a task is worth doing. When a task carries grades, they pursue the score rather than the knowledge; when it carries none, the same task may be treated as background noise. What looks like shortsighted calculation is in fact the result of long training: education has taught students that only quantifiable outcomes count. Their own sense of learning, however genuine, is suspended until it can be translated into the language of grades. Such dynamics resonate with long-

standing critiques of grade-driven motivation (Kohn 2013) and with recent debates on alternative grading (Stommel 2023).

Teachers encounter a parallel dilemma. Faced with awards, assessment rubrics, and institutional metrics, they must decide which practices are worth pursuing. When an activity aligns with recognized outcomes — such as measurable innovations or methods that appeal to award committees — it appears worthwhile. When it does not, even intrinsically valuable practices risk being abandoned. A teacher may see the worth of open-ended discussion or of acts of care that resist quantification, yet without external confirmation these practices lack institutional force. Similar performance pressures have been documented in studies of neoliberal university governance, where audit cultures and competitive metrics reshape academic priorities (Olssen and Peters 2005). In both cases, the compass of self-judgment is displaced. Students calculate whether learning “counts” through grades, while teachers calculate whether teaching “counts” through recognition. Performance logic thus binds both roles into the same oscillation: to pursue what can be recognized, or to relinquish what cannot. This performance orientation sets the stage for the further dynamics of delay, exemption, and privilege through which recognition structures the educational field.

6.2 The Logic of Delay

For most teachers and students, however, recognition comes not as constant reassurance but as periodic interruption. One teaches for months before an award cycle renders a verdict, or studies for weeks before an exam produces a grade. In these intervals, self-judgment cannot stand on its own; it is suspended, waiting to be ratified.

This delay produces its own form of power: it trains subjects to anticipate recognition, to live in the gap between effort and external confirmation. Both the teacher checking email for announcements and the student refreshing the

gradebook inhabit this same suspended temporality, their judgments stalled until external validation arrives.

6.3 Conditional Exemptions

Occasionally, recognition operates as a form of exemption. The colleague who wins awards year after year may find their legitimacy beyond question; students with stellar GPAs are sometimes allowed to bypass anxieties about single exams. Yet these exemptions are always provisional. They depend on continued performance and can be revoked the moment recognition falters. What looks like freedom from comparison is thus only conditional privilege, tethered to the same evaluative machinery that ensnares everyone else.

Seen in this light, exemptions are not the absence of suspension but its most fragile form: they appear to lift individuals above uncertainty, but remain dependent on forces outside their control. The uncontrollable element — whether an award committee's decision or a grading anomaly — always has the power to collapse the appearance of security, reminding even the privileged that legitimacy is never fully their own.

6.4 Closing Reflection: Living under Suspended Authority

Across indifference, delay, and conditional exemption, recognition reveals itself as more than a celebratory ornament. It is a mechanism that organizes the distribution of legitimacy within education. Some enjoy the privilege of treating recognition as surplus; most inhabit the suspended time between effort and confirmation; a few appear exempt, but only on the condition that recognition continues to flow.

In every case, self-judgment is displaced. The award and the grade do not simply record what has already been accomplished; they redefine the value of that accomplishment by determining whether it counts. Recognition thus functions not at the margins but at the center of educational life, structuring how

teachers and students alike come to see their work, their learning, and themselves.

What remains to be considered is the cost of this suspension. If recognition governs legitimacy so pervasively, what forms of subjectivity does it produce, and what possibilities does it foreclose? To conclude, I turn to these broader consequences — the critical dimension of how suspension binds teachers and students, and the fragile openings where alternative forms of evaluative authority might yet emerge.

7. Conclusion: The Cost of Suspension

This article has sought to show that the suspension of evaluative authority provides a common framework for understanding the dilemmas of both teachers and students — thereby extending analyses that have typically treated their situations in isolation. If education is often imagined as the cultivation of judgment, what does it mean when the authority to judge oneself is systematically suspended? The stories of teacher and student suggest that education does not simply foster growth but conditions subjects to mistrust their own evaluations, to await confirmation from elsewhere. In this way, recognition becomes less a reward than a prerequisite: without it, accomplishment remains invisible, even to the one who accomplished it.

This recursive logic carries a cost. It shapes teachers and students alike into subjects who measure themselves through the gaze of others, whose internal compasses are rendered fragile, always vulnerable to being overturned by the next award, grade, or metric. The promise of autonomy that education so often proclaims is thus undercut by its own evaluative machinery.

7.1 Critical Dimension

The suspension of evaluative authority narrows the space in which teachers and students can recognize themselves. Instead of learning to trust their own discernment, they are trained to doubt it until an institution validates their efforts. This is more than a psychological burden; it is a structural limitation on what education can be. When the capacity to judge oneself is displaced, education risks collapsing into the management of recognition, reducing growth to the production of metrics and visibility.

Suspension also works by reorganizing control. By placing recognition outside the individual, the system manufactures uncertainty. Teachers and students alike are left managing what they can control — lessons, assignments, preparation — but the worth of those efforts remains hostage to what they cannot control: awards, grades, or external evaluation. In this way, suspension governs by tethering agency to uncontrollable confirmation, channeling effort into a cycle of striving and waiting. What appears as individual diligence is in fact shaped by structural dependence, leaving autonomy fragile and provisional. Arendt (2006) reminds us that the task of education is bound to the cultivation of judgment — the capacity to orient oneself in the world and to take responsibility for it. Yet when the authority of judgment is systematically suspended, the very capacity that education claims to foster is undermined. Instead of cultivating judgment, schools and universities condition subjects to mistrust their own evaluations, binding them to the gaze of others. In this sense, the cost of suspension is not only personal fragility but also a philosophical contradiction: education undoes the autonomy it professes to cultivate. These concerns echo contemporary analyses of how performance-based accountability erodes teacher autonomy (Parcerisa et al. 2022) and the growing movement for alternative assessment (Blum 2020) as a way to re-center educational judgment in the hands of teachers and students.

7.2 Possibility and Openness

Yet even within this displacement lies a horizon of possibility. What would it take for self-judgment to count once again — not in isolation from community, but without being wholly dependent on external confirmation? The answer may not lie in abolishing recognition but in decentering it, opening space for teachers and students to affirm value without waiting for it to be stamped as legitimate. To imagine such a shift is not to prescribe a program but to gesture toward openness: an education where judgment is cultivated rather than suspended, and where legitimacy begins not only in the gaze of others but in the fragile authority to recognize oneself.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, Hannah. 2006. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Ball, Stephen J. 2003. "The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity." *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (2): 215–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065>.
- Biesta, Gert. 2009. "Good Education in an Age of Measurement: On the Need to Reconnect with the Question of Purpose in Education." *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 21 (1): 33–46.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9>.
- Biesta, Gert. 2017. "Education, Measurement and the Professions: Reclaiming a Space for Democratic Professionalism in Education." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49 (4): 315–30.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2015.1048665>.
- Blum, Susan D. 2020. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1956. *Education and Sociology*. New York: Free Press.
- Feldman, Joe. 2019. *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin / SAGE.

- Foucault, Michel. 2012. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage / Random House.
- Grafton, Anthony. 1994. *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Han, Byung-Chul. 2015. *The Burnout Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Han, Byung-Chul. 2017. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. London: Verso.
- Illich, Ivan. 1971. *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper; Row.
- Jonsson, Fredrik Albritton, and Carl Wennerlind. 2023. *Scarcity: A History from the Origins of Capitalism to the Climate Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kohn, Alfie. 2013. “The Case Against Grades.” *Counterpoints* 451: 143–53.
- Labaree, David F. 2012. *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Olssen, Mark, and Michael A. Peters. 2005. “Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy: From the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism.” *Journal of Education Policy* 20 (3): 313–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500108718>.
- Parcerisa, Lluís, Antoni Verger, Marcel Pagès, and Natalie Browes. 2022. “Teacher Autonomy in the Age of Performance-Based Accountability: A Review Based on Teaching Profession Regulatory Models (2017–2020).” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 30. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.6204>.
- Popkewitz, Thomas S. 1991. *A Political Sociology of Educational Reform: Power/Knowledge in Teaching, Teacher Education, and Research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rosenthal, Robert, and Lenore Jacobson. 2003. *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupil’s Intellectual Development*. Carmarthen, UK: Crown House.
- Sellar, Sam, David Rutkowski, and Greg Thompson. 2017. *The Global Education Race: Taking the Measure of PISA and International Testing*. Edmonton, Canada: Brush Education.
- Shepard, Lorrie A. 2000. “The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture.” *Educational Researcher* 29 (7): 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X029007004>.
- Simons, Maarten, and Jan Masschelein. 2008. “The Governmentalization of Learning and the Assemblage of a Learning Apparatus.” *Educational Theory* 58 (4): 391–415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2008.00296.x>.
- Stommel, Jesse. 2023. *Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop*. Madison, WI: Hybrid Pedagogy.

- Strathern, Marilyn. 2000. *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics, and the Academy*. London: Routledge.
- Taubman, Peter Maas. 2009. *Teaching by Numbers: Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education*. New York: Routledge.
- Tröhler, Daniel. 2011. *Languages of Education: Protestant Legacies, National Identities, and Global Aspirations*. New York: Routledge.
- Tyack, David, and Larry Cuban. 1997. *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Author Details

Shuai Sun is an Associate Teaching Professor in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Kansas. His teaching and writing examine chemistry education, equity, institutional evaluation, and the ways teaching is recognized and valued in higher education. He is also the author of *Breaking Barriers: Diversity and Equity in Chemistry*, which reflects his broader interest in equity and inclusion in chemistry education.

Corresponding author:

Shuai Sun

Email: shuaisun@ku.edu