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Anarchism and Education

Abraham P. DeLeon

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Contents

References And Suggested Readings	8
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References And Suggested Readings

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Although many activists have embraced anarchist theory, anarchism has been present in a variety of different academic areas as well. Anarchist sociology has been argued for (Purkis 2004), as well as the beginning sketches of an anarchist anthropology (Graeber 2004). But, often overlooked is the field of education, which has had an interesting relationship with anarchism and other radical theories of liberation. Anarchist theory is absent in educational literature and this gap exists in even more radical theories of education.

Anarchist theory in the context of education has influenced several key areas, such as organizational structure, political action for teachers, and rethinking the institution of schooling and the purposes that it serves. Anarchism for education means embracing some key factors about schooling. Anarchists contend that the various institutions of schooling help to reproduce racial, class, sexual orientation, and gender divisions sustaining classist practices that weaken working class and poor students. Paul Goodman, in his famous 1964 tract on *Compulsory Miseducation*, argued that schools benefit the rich and powerful and serve to indoctrinate students into an ideological system rather than serving as places of enlightenment and critical dialogue. Anarchists contend that teachers and students should be co-creators of knowledge and the divisions between “teacher,” “student,” and “principal” should be restructured.

Anarchist theory in education seeks to build schools that are not organized around rigid hierarchies and that each school should be as free and open as possible, allowing individuals to explore their identities, free their desires from historically oppressive social norms, and each school should be autonomous so that it better meets the needs of the community. Schools and the communities that they are located in should be in a symbiotic relationship based on mutual aid, community building, and non-coercive practices. Anarchists have played a historic role in education and educational theory, even if a limited one. They

have created schools that resemble anarchist conceptions and critiqued the institution of schooling itself. Francisco Ferrer, for example, instituted a “modern school” in Spain that incorporated vastly different ideological frameworks than schools of the time. Children were not exposed to a dogmatic curriculum or a slew of standardized tests that we now find in US schools; instead, the curriculum and the guiding philosophy that Ferrer argued for was the freedom of the individual child to pursue her/his intellectual interests in a non-hierarchical environment. Ferrer argued that schools had to be restructured in completely different ways to escape the colonizing and oppressive role that schools play in indoctrinating students into the status quo. Ferrer wanted teachers to have complete autonomy from state mechanisms so that they could encourage students to pursue educational interests of their choosing.

Other non-authoritarian and democratic schooling projects have existed that have been guided by some of the values and ideas expressed by Ferrer. A. S. Neill, one of the best-known proponents of alternative schooling, created Summerhill, a school that stressed educational growth based solely on the child’s interests. At Summerhill “lessons” arise from the students themselves and children are encouraged to explore their own interests. Although Neill’s ideas have been adopted and reformulated from their original inception, they continue to influence schools that wish to create educational experiences that allow the child an open, free, and non-coercive learning environment. Although not technically “anarchist,” Neill structured Summerhill without a rigid curriculum or a formal timetable for learning. He recognized the freedom of the individual child, and he rejected traditional teacher authority (Suissa 2006: 93). Other schools have been influenced by Neill’s ideas. In Albany, New York, the Albany Free School allows students to explore their own interests in a non-hierarchical way by including guest speakers and teachers in accordance with the students’ interests. At Albany, the students are

an integral part of the community around them, while the school serves as a center for learning and community action. Students learn to manage their own learning experiences and participate in the school community.

Although many “free schools” do not directly attribute anarchist theory to their ideological mission, they are comparable to what anarchists argue is necessary for building community and inculcating the natural spirit of learning that is non-coercive. Unlike traditional public education, “free schools” allow students the freedom to control their learning experiences and shape their educational goals. In traditional education schools, curriculum, activities, and learning experiences have been scripted, giving students limited choices in shaping their goals and objectives. These schools are structured in a rigid and hierarchical manner. “Free schools,” on the other hand, are the polar opposite as they tend not to have a school-wide curriculum. They promote a community based philosophy reflecting individual experience. Attendance is not always mandatory and classes often emerge organically through the inquiry and interests of the students. Student and teacher collaborate in order to pursue individualized academic and intellectual interests.

Besides just building on the concerns of the individual students, anarchist conceptions of schooling view community building as an integral role in the development of children. Students must feel part of a school community to further engage their creative and intellectual pursuits. The main point is that the education of students should rest in the hands of the individual, with the schools guiding that process by providing activities and instruction which meet the goals of the students and the community.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism ; Escuela Moderna Movement (The Modern School) ; Goldman, Emma (1869–1940)