

Striving to Become an Anarchist Educator

Why a Walk the Talk Approach Matters

Anarchist Pedagogies Network



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It is complicated, frustrating, and yet enriching to be an educator in last-stage capitalist societies. Anybody who defines themselves as an anarchist educator, in fact, gets to experience constant pressure and sometimes even threats due to their ideology and worldview.

These come not from what we believe in and think about, but rather from the fact that anarchism stands for values that pose a direct threat to power structures, whose mode of operation is to oppress and control. This oppression has as its main goal to enslave us in order to keep this dreadful system alive. An anarchist educator's role is to both expose these oppressive structures for what they are, but also to do so while maintaining the full autonomy and freedom of learners. Doing both things brings out some of the key difficulties in moving anarchist education from theory to practice.

Anarchist educators agree on some core pedagogical principles. These principles are freedom, mutual aid, rationality, and a complete rejection of hierarchies and rulers. These principles have a huge practical impact, since they stand in complete opposition to the globalized neoliberal colonizing idea of education that has been dominant throughout the last centuries. Where anarchists stand for freedom, state education chooses authoritarian methods, such as the authority of the teacher and the submissive position of students in the classroom; where anarchists stand for mutual aid, state education insists on an individualistic approach that puts competition and singular achievement on a pedestal, while separating us and rejecting free associations in communities of care.

But we have a problem we must consider. Although some of us might consider ourselves as anarchist educators, that does not mean that we have managed to *live our lives* as such. In practice, we might adopt some values without fully internalizing them. In the process of learning, especially as we grow up and are educated in authoritarian and controlling environments, we might reproduce these practices. Furthermore, our ability to create the kind of just and free society we want can also be limited by the very real, daily pressures and limitations that we currently experience in these same environments today. Unless we are conscious of our own upbringing, and the structures and hierarchies that we are currently experiencing, and unless we invest great efforts in unlearning them, we will not be able to move forward towards what we might call anarchist education.

During these wonderful processes of unlearning and relearning, we will probably face some uncomfortable truths, both about our past and about our present. We might learn of our limitations, and gain some clarity as to what we can do to facilitate a more equal and inclusive educational environment. Self-reflection and a process of assessing and adjusting our values to our everyday actions is never easy. And yet, how can we contribute to create free and solidary societies if we do not act as such in our contact with others?

Children and Youth Are Not Our Property

In many Western societies, we still have this wrong notion that children and youth are our property. We have normalized the discourse and behavior that children and youth are like mud that has no thoughts, feelings, or observations of its own. Strangely enough, some people might consider themselves anarchist educators, and yet, behind closed doors (or perhaps even publicly), present strong authoritarian positions that put considerable limitations around children

and youth's autonomies over themselves, their lives, and their bodies. This is a highly dangerous and harmful approach.

Historically, anarchist educators have been very clear on how to follow secular principles to avoid religious indoctrination, what anti-authoritarian practices can be implemented to enhance children's autonomy, or how to address holistic pedagogical programs with a focus on the lived experience of the child. Educators in the Modern School of New York during the early 20th century, for example, maintained that they should wait for children to assert their own interests, instead of forcing curriculum onto them. Those educators, and others, have emphasized the importance of play and denounced authoritarian educational practices prevalent in state-run schools, which do little but oppress the natural tendencies of children to be active, enthusiastic, and curious. Nowadays, other issues have arose that perhaps anarchist educators of the past may not have encountered, and therefore require us to develop our theory and practices accordingly.

In recent decades, in addition to a much stronger neoliberal development, we have experienced a tighter standardization of individuals, where classifications have taken an awful patriarchal turn, together with a more clinical, quantitative and individualistic understanding of us as people. We have been objectivized, turned by capitalist elites into average individuals whose only goal in life is to work and produce. But not only that, the easiest way to keep us oppressed was to create narrow classifications that distinguish what kinds of roles we could have in society. These include strict classifications around race, gender, and economic class, and have been tremendously effective in promoting the capitalist ideal, while at the same time have been equally effective in creating oppression.

So, why should anarchist educators continue to obey this horrendous denial of our human diversity in order to fit in some kind of neoliberal production line? Why should we allow our bodies to be controlled, as a way of making us into property? Furthermore, why should we cooperate in a mechanism that does this and much more to the children in our lives?

Autonomy Over Ourselves

In the process of turning children and youth into the future of the workforce, many people have suffered erasure, prosecution, and all kinds of violence. To varying degrees, many authoritarian supremacist ideologies aim to create a perfect human being, that is better than anybody else. A key characteristic of these societies, especially in the West, is the patriarchal idea of binarity and cis-normativity; that is, the strange idea that there are only two genders, and that everyone must identify with one or the other. This characteristic is inseparable from the capitalist ideal, which requires turning of human experience into commodifiable and quantifiable units, and therefore cannot tolerate a complicated, nuanced, and multi-faceted experience of existence. This capitalist tendency to flatten our lives into unites of production and consumption does nothing to contribute to a positive and fulfilling experience of who we are in the world.

Bodily autonomy, then, is not just based on physical appearance, but on a radical holistic idea that we articulate our unique identities through what we wear, how we take care of our bodies, what kind of values we feed it with, and how we interact and learn with other people. For anarchist educators, this raises questions regarding the educator's ability to practice the principle of freedom when meeting children's body autonomy. These questions are multi-faceted, but the

important focus should be on how do we limit our adult gaze in order to respect children's bodily autonomy while practicing the rest of our anarchist principles.

For some adults nowadays, it is challenging to keep up with all the collective unlearning that is going on. Some of us might see this as a healthy sign of many societies rebelling once more against capitalistic control. But for some, these processes might be frightening and give a sense of losing control. And here comes the tricky part: *the discomfort we feel is our own internalized capitalistic values destabilizing because of the challenge of being unlearned*. And we shouldn't stop there. We should actually learn how to trust children and youth enough to listen to them, learn from them, and break these controlling behaviors in order to practice the anarchist values we believe in.

It takes a village to raise a children, but it also takes a lot of damaged egos to live according to our values.

We do not own children and youth. If we are lucky, we can walk through life with them in a constant mutual learning when we as parents, educators or casual adults get the chance to relearn knowledge that has been imbued by hateful capitalistic thinking.

Freedom Needs Something More

Exclusively supporting children and youth's right to freedom and autonomy is not enough. When thinking about bodily autonomy, we have many examples that show how authoritarian behaviors in adults, either individually or institutionally, can harm young people, denying them of their right make free choices on their bodies.

We have no reason to assume that what we know about gender is the whole and entire truth. In fact, many cultures possess nuanced concepts of gender that complicate our modern binary understandings. Indigenous people in North America, such as the Crow or Navajo, for example, recognize Two Spirit persons, who can cross gender roles, expression and sexual orientation, while possessing male or female biological markers. These and similar approaches make it possible for children and youth to retain their freedom in finding their identity and presenting it to the world as authentically as they wish. Yet, that is not enough. Gender is one of the aspects of our bodily autonomy where anarchist educators should have a clear, yet nuanced approach, which is significantly different from other educational theories. In order to grow as balanced, open people, who engage in solidarity, we must give our children and youth much more than freedom. We must give them our trust, our love, and our care.

When some of us are still holding on to the authoritarian idea that we as adults know what's best for children, we are taking away their voice. We are behaving exactly as political representatives, religious leaders, and any other figure who tells us what to think or how to live. Any person, no matter their level of formal education or their social class, should be questioning the ways in which bodily autonomy among children and youth is understood and practiced. We are aware that much of the social control nowadays is institutionalized, and that is even a bigger reason to keep on fighting for a childhood free from oppression and control.

We should be working together to be able to give our children the gift of freedom, packed with care and love. Loving ourselves is a revolutionary act, and being in solidarity and caring with all children, in a way that challenges norms and classifications should be one of our goals as anarchist educators.

Freedom is not only a word to be theorized on, but it is a right that everybody has to choose for themselves, their bodies, minds and souls. Nobody should question another person's existence or their right to define and express themselves as they wish. Neither should anyone decide for someone else what they can or cannot do with their bodies, because the personal is political and we all should motivate each other to live in harmony with ourselves. Contrary to some arguments, this radical notion of freedom is substantial enough to include all, and can be inclusive of all gender identifications. In solidary societies, caring, support, love, and acceptance are the key, and these types of actions help us grow as resilient strong people, capable of fighting oppressive ideas and systems.

Please, Teacher, Leave Those Kids Alone

This is a kind reminder that being an anarchist educator is an ongoing learning process. Sometimes painful, constantly curious, but always self-critical of the old patterns that might disrupt good anarchist intentions.

If we want to build free societies, we must start by being respectful adults. To raise autonomous children and youth, we must learn to put their freedom to choose before our right to decide for them. To have solidary communities, we must engage in conscious caring in interpersonal relations. When we implement these principles, we can start talking about ways to implement collective action — an important anarchist step in its own right — that will bring about large-scale social change (more on collective action and its unique characteristic within educational contexts will be published in the near future).

We must always be aware to walk the talk. Let children learn about themselves and explore how they see themselves as individuals. The gift of freedom is best served with love and respect. Because with love and respect, we are all, children, youth and adults, strong enough to crush the oppressive systems together.

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