

# When Students Build Their Schools

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*Will learning facts free us: "and the truth shall set you free"?  
Can we ever help another person have the experience of being free;  
can we practice freedom with others or on our own? Assuming  
that we all develop free will and judgment as adults, how can we  
prepare children for it?*

*At heart, should we be trying to teach freedom to children, or should we  
try to learn it from and with them?*

## The Adventure Playground Movement

Where can kids find liberty? Where can they find both the negative freedom of escaping from rules, schoolteachers and pledges of allegiance, and the creative freedom of having a bucket of nails and a pile of wood, digging in the earth with their friends or building a fire and having tea? Kids will find the spaces they need with or without our help, in abandoned junkyards or under houses. There are records going back to Ancient Egypt and examples in Roman and Greek literature of kids going just outside of town to build dens and fires for themselves.<sup>1</sup> Today, however, crowded cities and a faster pace of life make it necessary that we intentionally create space for this free creativity.

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In 1931, a Danish landscape architect C. T. Sørensen watched children playing with scraps in a construction site and saw the possibilities for "a junk playground in which children could create and shape, dream and imagine a reality."<sup>2</sup> This became more than an idyllic desire during the Nazi occupation, writes Keith Cranwell, because small acts would often be brutally punished as sabotage, so safe outlets for children's energies were urgently needed.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these junk playgrounds was built in 1943 near a housing complex in Copenhagen, with a stock of raw materials instead of fixed structures and continues today. This idea was brought to England by Lady Allen of Hurtwood, who had been inspired by watching kids playing in sections of town that were bombed-out during the Blitz. Today, there are hundreds of adventure playgrounds worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Their landscapes change

Adventure Playgrounds and  
Children's Creativity:  
Report of the Sixth International  
Conference [of the International  
Playground Association] Held at  
The University Bucconi, Milan,  
Italy, August 31st-September  
1st, 1975. (Sheffield,  
The Association 1975)

Lambert, Adventure  
Playgrounds: A Personal Account  
of a Play-leader's Work as Told  
to Jenny Pearson (London:  
Jonathan Cape, 1974), 14

Norman, An architecture of  
play: a survey of London's  
adventure playgrounds,  
London: Four Corners Books,  
1983), 17

There are about 1,000  
adventure playgrounds in  
Europe, and a handful in the  
United States, including one in  
Berkeley, CA.

continuously, as quickly as children can get together, make up their minds and act. Some keep goats, rabbits and ducks, others have abandoned railroad cars.

5  
Marjory "Lady Allen of  
Hurtwood" Allen, *Adventure  
Playgrounds* (London, 1950), 12

*Now we kids have got our own home and country.*<sup>5</sup>

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Variously, "work leader",  
"worker", or "animateur" in  
France.

Adults and parents are allowed to play as well, but in the spirit of the Copenhagen playground, as its first grown-up "play leader"<sup>6</sup> John Bertelsen put it,

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Jack Lambert, *Adventure  
Playgrounds: A Personal Account  
of a Play-leader's Work as Told to  
Jenny Pearson* (London: Jonathan  
Cape, 1974), Lambert, 18

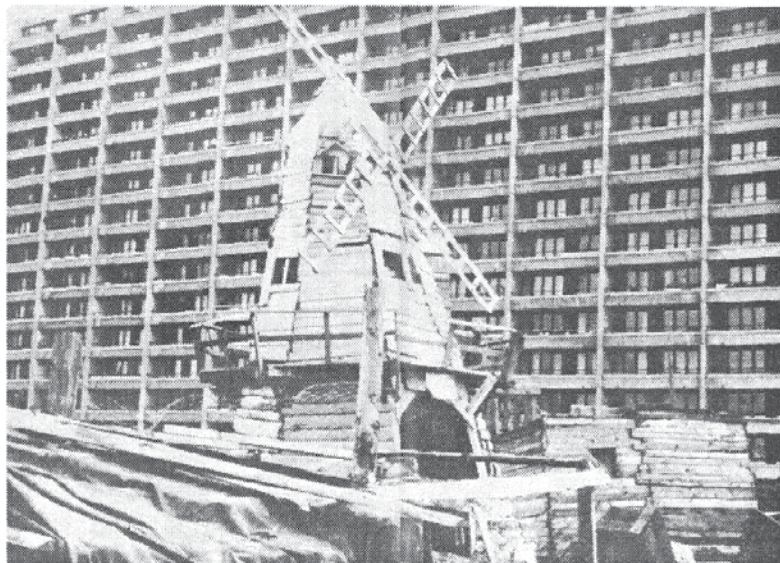
The children are sovereign and the initiative must come from them. The leader can make suggestions but must never demand. He must obtain the tools and material needed or requested by the children but must at any time be prepared to give way to new activities. To organize and arrange programmes is to stifle imagination and initiative and preclude children whose lively curiosity and interests constantly demand new outlets.<sup>7</sup>

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Marjory "Lady Allen of  
Hurtwood" Allen, *Adventure  
Playgrounds*, (London, 1950), 16

Adventure playgrounds hardly need an educational theory to back them up. As a visitor to the The Yard, an adventure playground in 1940's Minneapolis points out, "I doubt if I could have found 60 kids as happy as that anywhere else in Minnesota." Young people at The Yard started their own paper, *The Daily Horn*. They built igloos and ice skated all winter.<sup>8</sup> "I come over here to play every night because I like it here. It's fun."<sup>9</sup>

9  
Jack Lambert, *Adventure  
Playgrounds: A Personal Account  
of a Play-leader's Work as  
Told to Jenny Pearson* (London:  
Jonathan Cape, 1974), 141



Spinning windmill built by kids at an adventure playground in Denmark, in front of apartments definitely made by adults.



Nobody ever makes you to go to an adventure playground. What other possibilities can we invent for children (and adults) to take over, to rebuild everything according to their dreams? What else would children create if we gave them the tools? Which are the proper tools? Are adult insecurities (safety concerns, the need to play the roles of parent and teacher) the main obstacle to handing over the tools?

### Our Own Initiative

It was children who invented free play and they will continue to invent it, again and again. "That's a right-angle triangle," said a boy, pointing at a gable roof, "I invented it." The free playgrounds' anarchic injection of authority is simply acknowledging the way children like to play, not a theory to be imposed on them. The young teachers at the playground in Copenhagen were a resource for the kids, providing tools and suggestions when asked, but never demanding anything.

## How else can we learn initiative but by practice?

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There are a few full-time schools where children can guide their own education, such as the successful Summerhill school outside of London, founded in 1921 and still running. Its few rules are decided by a general assembly of teachers and students as equals. No one has to go to class unless they wish to and new arrivals who have the "lesson aversion" brought on by traditional school, will often play in the machine shop or pottery studio for months until they crave the structure of classes.<sup>10</sup>

### Integral Education

During the nineteenth century, the idea that play, work and learning go together became known as "integral education". People have often looked for a balance between mind and body but it took pre-Socialist productivity fetishist Charles Fourier to point out that this wholeness could be generated through the act of working.<sup>11</sup> Challenging and creative work can be much more than a balance of thought and exercise; it can develop the mind and body interdependently. Class conflict in the aftermath of the French Revolution had exposed the widening gap between those paid to know and those paid to do. School only made the problem worse, training intellectuals who were proud of their utter dependence upon servants, meanwhile teaching that work was beastly and so best done by beasts. Fourier predicted that when work was

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A. S. Neill, Summerhill, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1960)

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To illustrate the difference between physical creativity and exercise, take the example given by long-time playground adult Jack Lambert: an adventure playground was bulldozed by the well-meaning community of Parkhill, England. Once the destruction was complete, he had to witness his young friends march single-file back into the new field during their games period at school, where they used to make their fires and build huts.

12  
Charles Fourier, *The Theory of Four Movements*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1799]), 257

13  
Giampietro Berti, *Il pensiero anarchico dal Settecento al Novecento*, (Manduria, P. Lacaita, 1998), 707-708

14  
"Leo Tolstoy." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2002. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. 22 May. 2009 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/598700/Leo-Tolstoy>>

15  
Codello, pp. 88, 93, 510 - 514

16  
William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ch. IV:2. 1793

attractive, rich and poor would work together. This was picked up again in Marx and Engels' Manifesto of 1849, published to integrate work and schooling, and to make education available for all. Integral education intends to grow complete human beings, but its larger social dimension promises to bring an end to the segregation of the class system.<sup>12</sup>

For over two decades Paul Robin developed integral education into a concrete theory. In 1880 he brought his ideas to the Cempuis orphanage in France — a time when orphanages were jails, where society hid its victims — and ran the school until his teaching license was revoked for political reasons in 1894. The elements he fused together in his teaching were “knowing and doing, of science and art.” His school relied on the inexhaustible fountain of teaching and challenge presented by nature. Love of nature's beauty would inspire the desire to make art, and confrontation with the harsh reality of nature would push us to crave every insight made available by science.<sup>13</sup>

### Uninfested With Weeds

For a teacher given the role of providing an education to students, one of the most difficult tasks is to teach without dogma, to allow students space to put forward their own beliefs, and to build their education upon the foundation of their own personal ideas. To do this, a teacher must always be learning from the students, the school must always be an experiment.

To use the words of Russian author Leo Tolstoy after he toured Europe in the 1850's to study teaching, “Who should learn writing of whom: Peasant children from us, or we from peasant children?”<sup>14</sup> He soon opened a school for the peasant children on his estate, “Yasnaya Polyana”, where education was rooted in daily life, a principle which Paolo Freire later made into the core of his popular literacy teaching method.<sup>15</sup>

In 1793 William Godwin put it this way, to teach children is “taking the mind in its original state, a soil prepared for culture, and as yet uninfested with weeds.”<sup>16</sup>

Two problems remained: what to plant in this soil, and who should be farming there? Who should do the teaching? The answer, *children themselves*, might seem obvious but was impossible to accept from within the rational, system-building mentality of the nineteenth century. In order to learn how to educate themselves and continue to learn throughout life, children must eventually take charge as the Communist





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Preface to the 1888 English edition of the Communist Manifesto

Manifesto states that, "the emancipation of the workers must be the act of the working class itself."<sup>17</sup> Otherwise, we will always be dependents.

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Robert H. Chappell, "Anarchy revisited: an inquiry into the public education dilemma", *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 2 No. 4, p. 357. Pergamon Press, 1978. Francisco Ferrer, *Principios de Moral Científica para Uso de las Escuelas Racionalistas*, [written from prison and unpublished], 1907.

What to teach is a more complicated problem. The justification for adults to set a curriculum is fair enough: children don't have much opportunity to be exposed to the authors, techniques, and the other life experiences which teachers have. When Francisco Ferrer started the first Modern School in Barcelona, 1901, he chose the teaching materials very carefully, and rejected every book that presented rigid, dogmatic ideas. The school opened without a single book in its library. Like Godwin, Ferrer was convinced that we aren't born with ideas; they come from those around us. He eventually admitted the first book into the library, Jean Grave's, *The Adventures of Nono*,<sup>18</sup> and the school soon had its own publishing house which produced dozens of popularizations and translations into Spanish for use in their classes. In a country totally dominated by the Church, the Modern School was the first to promise a rational children's education in Spain, and offer a new morality outside of religion. Good and bad could be judged for oneself; judgment was once again a human ability to be learned and practiced, not a divine absolute. Ferrer was imprisoned and shot to death for his beliefs and for a pamphlet, most likely planted by the police, supposedly tying him to the general strike during Spain's unpopular colonial war against Morocco. His martyrdom spread the ideals of the Modern School worldwide.

In New York City, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman started a Modern School where Jack London and Upton Sinclair gave lectures, and where Man Ray was a student.<sup>19</sup>

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For more on the Modern School movement, see Paul Avrich, *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

*I know very well we could not thus realize all our hopes, that we should often be forced, for lack of knowledge, to employ undesirable methods; but a certitude would sustain us in our efforts— namely, that even without reaching our aim completely we should do more and better in our still imperfect work than the present school accomplishes. I like the free spontaneity of a child who knows nothing, better than the world-knowledge and intellectual deformity of a child who has been subjected to our present education.*<sup>20</sup>

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Emma Goldman "Francisco Ferrer." *Mother Earth*. v. 4 (November 1909), 275-77

### Public Schooling and Universal Liberty

Men and women in the Nineteenth Century fought for their emancipation, in every area of life and work, for their own and for each other's children, and fought over both the immediate and the distant future. Aftershocks of the Revolution were felt in France in the uprisings of 1830, 1848, and 1870, and all over the continent.<sup>21</sup> Workers hoped to raise their children out of poverty, and we still remember their efforts because, instead of hoarding personal family fortunes, these workers' movements set as their goal the total liberation of humankind, of masters and slaves together.

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The most moving of these uprisings was the Paris Commune of 1871. See Eugene Schulkind, *The Paris Commune and the classic The Civil War in France* by K. Marx.

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During the birth of public education, poor people felt they could tear away the medieval veil of ignorance, when for the first time technological progress forced nations to educate their workforce in order to compete. For an instant, the doors were opened to a scientific, rational and secular education for all. However, far from handing classrooms over to the students, schools became increasingly authoritarian in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Every faction wanted to plant their ideology in schools, from Marx and the socialists, to Dewey and the liberal democrats, to Hegel and the German idealists. This battle tied society and education ever closer together, making radical change ever less possible.<sup>22</sup>

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Francesco Codello, *La Buona Educazione: esperienze libertarie e teorie anarchiche in Europa da Godwin Neillo Angeli*: Milan, 2005), 65-67.

So, the doors quickly shut again as new public schools became a suffocating weapon of standardization in the hands of bureaucratic agencies. A few experimental schools like those started by Robin and Ferrer show us what is possible, but as pressure built to more efficiently mold children to serve society, opportunities for freedom were squeezed out and forced to find new spaces.

In 1904, Sebastien Faure created "La Ruche" (The Beehive), which was not a school, but a educational community or a family. He inherited Robin's working materials and P. J. Proudhon's idea of a *polytechnic education* which would liberate us from stagnant lives dependent on one profession and from any limits on our abilities.

As Faure saw it, an educator worked in the garden of youth, seeding, protecting, and most of all, allowing the flowers to grow; but *an educator must* also set an example by their own actions. The means used to teach must be coherent with the end results: discipline would create disciplinarians, kindness would create kindness. As with other anarchist schools, reward and punishment were not used, nor rankings. These methods were made the winners lazy and arrogant, and discouraged the losers. As in Tolstoy's school, education was based in daily life.<sup>23</sup>

8, 93, 510 - 514

### The Future

As Ferrer put it, "Rulers have always taken care to control the education of the people. They know better than anyone else that their power is based almost entirely on the school, and they therefore insist on retaining their monopoly on it."<sup>24</sup>

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So why have there not been more schools devoted to liberty? Teaching for freedom will give birth to a generation of people ready and able to think and cooperate freely, and then, these people will remake society according to their own dreams.