

RUNNING HEAD: "Free Schools"

The Free School Alternative to Public Education
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What are Free Schools? A Quick Sketch

During 1960s and 70s, hundreds—probably thousands—of alternative schools were founded in the United States as direct responses to perceived failings of the public school system. On the more radical end of this group were schools that either called themselves “free schools” or were associated (by themselves or others) with a “free school movement.” As will be discussed later, this designation is certainly not perfect and membership in the group is debatable, but most of these schools share an objection to the traditionally unequal student-teacher relationship and power structure that is enforced in public schools. The positive vision free schools offer as an alternative to the public school model is an education centered around ideals—such as freedom, autonomy, and intellectual curiosity—and directed by children, rather than adults. On a more concrete level, free schools are almost always governed democratically, with children and adults both having some voice in decision-making; children of all ages are usually accepted as students, with universally equal standing; students are responsible for and free to determine the direction, pace, and content of their own education; and schools are staffed by a combination of modestly-paid teachers, volunteers, and parents (Kozol, 1972).

Thus every day at a free school develops spontaneously, with students’ whims and interests driving their activity, rather than some arbitrary structure. Classes, when they exist at all, might meet and dismiss spontaneously and form only when students were interested. Free schools were and still are started primarily by groups of ordinary citizens and parents are often involved the school’s initial planning. Whether their students are exclusively middle-class and white, all poor and from racial minorities, or

some combination of the two, most free schools are not literally “free.” Because they are private institutions, they charge tuition, though fees are often administered on a sliding scale (Graubard, 1972).

Philosophical Foundations for the Free School Approach to Education

While the free school “movement” had no official leadership or unified vision, the people starting free schools and writing about them had some shared intellectual pedigree. Most basically, free school proponents believed, in varying degrees, that children learned best in a state of freedom, a belief that Ann Swidler (1979) notes can be traced back to Tolstoy and Rousseau. That faith in “freedom” as the condition for learning served as the foundational principle of Summerhill, the free school founded by A.S. Neill in Suffolk, England that was most often cited as a model for the American free schools of the ‘60s and ‘70s.

Neill wanted to create a school in which children could develop free of external compulsion or repression. As Alan Graubard (1972) points out, Neill made the highly disputable claim that children would develop optimally if supported and nurtured but not coerced into anything. In doing so, he asserted an innate goodness or wisdom in children and a dangerous authoritarianism in society at large. His goal in founding Summerhill, then, was not merely to create another kind of school, but to form “a total community (Graubard, 13).”

The American free schools that followed Summerhill usually placed less emphasis on their specific attitudes toward child-rearing and more on their structural and methodological differences with public schools, but they still embraced Neill’s belief that

children's educations should be driven by individual choice, rather than compulsion (Graubard). To that end, one of the most universal features of these American free schools is a regular school meeting, either daily or weekly, in which a body of students and staff raises, discusses, and debates any issues of concern to the school community. Because all school rules and procedures must come out of this collective decision-making, they develop organically from the students' own ideals instead of arriving fully formed from an external authority. The students at the Brooklyn Free School, for example, created an extremely long sequence of rules regarding the use of school computers for playing games; the complexity reflected the students' thought process on the issue as well as the diversity of opinions among students and staff (Gell).

An Overview of the Free School "Movement"

As stated earlier, the existence of a single, cohesive free school "movement" during the 1960s and 70s is arguable; on the other hand, the sudden proliferation of schools based, more or less, on the Summerhill model is indisputable. Graubard (1972) illustrates this grassroots phenomenon with rough counts of new free schools founded each year: from 1967-68, twenty to thirty new free schools were founded; between sixty and eighty were founded in 1969 alone; in 1970, that figure rose above 150; and at the time of Graubard's writing there had already been over two hundred new free schools founded from 1971-72. In his totals, he acknowledged that the term "free school" was being applied to a range of different experiments in alternative education, from the Summerhill-esque self-identified "free schools" that served mostly middle-class white students, to the "community schools," such as Roxbury Community School in Boston,

founded in the interests of urban black students. These two kinds of schools differed dramatically in some respects: for instance, community schools tended to be more traditional in their structure and in their focus on academic skills (Graubard). Critics often associated free schools with the hippie counterculture of the '60s and '70s and its rejection of authority as the basis for social structure, when only some predominantly white schools on the less-structured end of the free school spectrum really merited that association (Kozol). Despite free schools' independence from the counterculture of that era, their numbers dwindled with the decline of large-scale advocacy for radical social reform (Graubard). Many free schools from the "movement" of the '60s and '70s are still operating today and new ones are still being founded—the two-year-old Brooklyn Free School in New York City being a prime example of the free school concept's contemporary appeal (Gell). For the most part, the founders of these schools are not claiming large-scale affiliation with other free schools and perhaps it is most useful to consider more recent free schools as growing out of the specific problems and communal ideals of their local contexts.

Critiques of Free Schools and Recurring Problems

Because they present themselves as a viable alternative to public schools, free schools bear the burden of proving their educational merit to parents, students, educators, and government officials. This is no easy task, of course, for an institution that fosters a drastically different concept of success and free schools must balance their avowal of an alternative notion of educational success with their need to assure students and parents that children will learn in an unstructured environment. To a certain extent, free schools do replace the public school model of learning, focused on academic skills, with one of

learning how to function in a democratic society (Swidler). By extension, then, learning and success in the free school context look different than they do in the public schools: for example, according to the Brooklyn Free School, students will be successful if they “grow naturally-socially and emotionally, as well as academically...in their own way; are happy with themselves and...are confident that they are ready to assume whatever challenges await them (Brooklyn Free School, 2006).”

Most critiques of free schools thus center on the schools’ conception(s) of learning and success. As stated earlier, many free schools adhere to the belief, expressed at Summerhill and elsewhere that children can grow, develop, and learn in the best way possible if they are merely allowed to do so naturally. Lawrence Cremin (1973) points out the flaws in a belief that an unstructured school community can allow such “natural” development: “the school never has *tabulae rasae* to begin with” because all other extra-educational aspects of society, such as commerce, politics, and popular culture teach children a particular structured vision of society (208). It is naïve of free school organizers, he claims, to imagine that students will not bring these structural influences into the unstructured school community. Instead, free schools should develop in their students a critical awareness of these different competing structures or power dynamics (Cremin, 209).

Jonathan Kozol (1972) makes a related criticism of those free schools that serve only students from privileged, white backgrounds. All free schools base their particular combination of structure and non-structure on a vision of what kind of society their organizers aspire to (Swidler). In the case of free schools that serve only a narrow community of the privileged, the audacity of attempting such a utopian goal is cushioned

by the fact that, as the “haves” of their society, white students will have many opportunities remain open for them even if their educational experiment fails. Black students in a free school do not have such a comfort: they may withdraw from a public school in a rejection of the traditional model of hierarchical authority, but they are the disempowered in that traditional power structure and thus have nothing to fall back on if their free school community fails (Kozol).

Even as Kozol decries free schools that ignore (in their demographic composition) preexisting socioeconomic hierarchies, he offers hope that they can provide students with an alternative educational experience in which learning and success are self-determined. Kozol, Cremin, and Swidler all affirm the potential of a free school to give students a sense of autonomy and entitlement. This ability to empower seems dependent, however, on the provision of some amount of positive structure, to direct students towards the ideal of social equality.

Summerhill School, now more than eighty years old, has evolved in the same manner as many of the longer-lived free schools, in developing more positive structure. Although they are not compelled to attend, students are offered a schedule of classes for each day, rather than being allowed to initiate a class whenever they like (Summerhill School, 2004). The presence of structures like this does diminish a free school’s claims to absolute equality of roles between student and teacher, but when such structures are incorporated into a vibrant democratic community, subject to review and discussion by all community members, such structures are merely positive proof of the free school’s success.

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