

Forget about theories

...learn about the practice

David Gribble

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Anarchist practice in education is emerging throughout the world, but it tends to describe itself as “democratic” to avoid the negative reaction which the word “anarchist” so often arouses. The name of the annual International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) was chosen by the two fourteen-year-old girls who ran the fifth conference which was held at Sands School in England in 1997. They didn’t like the name, but they couldn’t think of a better one, and it has stuck.

IDECs have been held in Austria, England, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Ukraine and the USA, and in 2004 and 2005 they will be in India and Germany.

A few free school examples that exist around the world will give an idea of their variety and the degree to which they differ from the conventional model.

Tokyo Shure, in Japan, which was founded in 1985 and has now expanded to three different sites, is a school for school-refusers. That means that if you are enrolled there you do not have to go. It is open all day and you turn up when you want to and leave when you want to.

The Fundación Educativa Pestalozzi, in Ecuador, was founded in 1979 and is still going strong, with about 200 students between the ages of 3 and 18. The staff are not allowed to teach, explain, guide, motivate, persuade, anticipate or point things out; the staff is responsive rather than directive. Every choice must be left to the individual child.

Lumiar, in São Paulo, Brazil, was founded early in 2003 with 24 pupils, and within its first year doubled in size. According to its founders’ text-books, vacations, rules, buildings and classrooms are obsolete.

Butterflies—in Delhi, India—is an organization for street and working children. The Butterflies educators work on the streets and in the markets and the street children who come to them learn to read and write and to assert their rights. Although time with the educators means a reduction in their earnings, which average only 30 rupees (90 cents) a day, about 800 children come regularly.

Room 13, in Fort William, Scotland, is an art room attached to a normal primary school, for children up to age 11. The children take complete charge of all arrangements, from the buying of materials and secretarial work to the appointment and payment of staff. In 2004 they raised £200,000 (about \$360,000) to enable them to teach other people about their ideas.

Seliba sa Boithutu, in Lesotho is just a quiet, comfortable place to study, offering materials, computers and editorial help. Learners decide what, when, and how much to learn. The annual membership fee is about US \$3 and the fee for users is about twenty cents per day.

There are many similar schools in the USA. The best known is Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, which has been widely imitated. Sudbury is at one end of the spectrum in its refusal even to suggest a curriculum of any kind, and at the other end in the way the school community insists on a list of rules governing behavior.

There are so-called “democratic” educational institutions with total or deliberately limited authority, rules and no rules, punishments and no punishments, timetables and no timetables, compulsory attendance and voluntary

attendance, buildings and no buildings. They may be for those who can afford fees or for the utterly deprived, in cities or out in the country, in the prosperous parts of the West or in areas of great poverty. What distinguishes them all from conventional schools is a total respect for the dignity of the child. While adults may excel in size, experience, and knowledge, children's strengths may lie in empathy, originality, imagination and energy. Regardless of these differences and because of the egalitarian context, children and adults conduct their affairs as equals.

Many more examples of such experimentation can be found at

www.idenetwork/member.html

Web sites for some of the organizations described in this article are:

www.shure.or.jp

www.lumiar.org.br

www.room13scotland.com

www.ssb.org.ls

www.sudval.org

David Gribble's books, *Real Education: Varieties of Freedom*, published in 1998 and *Lifelines*, due out in September 2004, both published in England by Libertarian Education, give detailed accounts of many such schools and organizations.

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