Stumbling Upon Public School Utopias

Tales from two front lines

William Boyer (Bill Boyer)

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Part One: Utopia Outlined

February 1999: I'm pivoting on my desk, basking in a student-led discussion, momentarily featuring a couple of black-clad teenagers contrasting the ideological differences between Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* with Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

The twenty alert faces of the elective "Russian Social Anarchism," stretch about the carpeted room, where Pilot pens race across lined paper as if there are only seconds left to write before our CD musical segue into Chumbawamba, while a girl with cropped pink hair raises her hand, eager for the previous student to call upon her.

I join the note scribbling with three reminders; block the final scene to Chekhov's *The Seagull* for the upcoming Russian theater class-troupe, confirm one of next month's guest speakers on "Mendacity in the Mass Media," and call the concerned mother who is wondering why I am supplementing our latest readings with two articles from the *Fifth Estate*.

This is a typical hour for this ambitious school within a school, a 99% all-white suburban high school, Birmingham Seaholm, in one of the most affluent communities in the entire state of Michigan. The student-centered, teacher-guided, inter-disciplinary social studies and English curriculum known as Flex (for flexible learning) is the closest I will come to experiencing a near perfect educational utopia. A merging of exhilarating high school inquisitiveness with college-level course work, the dynamic curriculum often functions consistently with anarchist principles, such as unanimous consensus teacher organizing, diverse student-selected course offerings, and even student-led seminars [for a short history on the origins of anarchist free schooling, see the companion article on Francisco Ferrer and the Spanish Modern Schools].

I quickly come to savor and be spoiled by this unique public school oasis. For five months I treasure this thirty-year old experiment in creative critical learning, kept alive mainly by a half dozen eclectic, highly dedicated teachers, and an active parent minority-an educated elite either nostalgic for their lost sixties idealism, or patronizingly realistic, preparing their children for their eventual encounter with liberalism, on the way up some well-nourished corporate ascensions.

The new principal remains puzzled over how such a hippie relic continues to thrive amid such a conservative and opulent populace. His irritation swells proportionately to his growing awareness of a complete lack of hierarchy. In the spirit of anarchism, Flex contains no department head, no chief organizer-indeed, no chain of command as all decisions are made unanimously by its small teaching collective, usually in relation to subsequent student feedback.

Suspicious of such freedoms after thirty years of thriving achievement, the administration announces impending cutbacks and forced transfers for at least two of the Flex teachers, just after renovations for the district's two football fields, totaling over $500,000, are completed. Already well educated in the history of protest, these Flex students reflexively rally around their besieged mentors. The kids conduct impromptu teach-ins, disrupt assemblies,

gather hundreds of student and parent signatures, spontaneously create satirical street theater in the hallways, and even storm the principal's office to demand educational justice.

Assuming such an uprising could not be student-directed, their most recent hire (me) becomes one of the suspected agent provocateurs. Top school administrators reveal their displeasure at my support of the upstart student activism, as they withhold part of my permanent substitute pay. I contemplate staging a one-teacher picket line and strike.

Although the besieged Flex program will eventually be salvaged, I know my happy days in suburban utopia will soon crash. As students begin debating the implications of their newest teacher quitting, I abruptly walk out a few weeks before school ends, before I could be officially terminated.

Part Two: Crossing the Great Divide

Out of my anarchist dream job, in late August 1999, I crash-land six miles south, winding up at Oak Park High, in the poorest school district within the same (Oakland) county as Birmingham; it's adjacent to Detroit, with a majority of students claiming Detroit addresses. I'm assigned five social studies classes, each crammed with over 30 African American and one or two Chaldean students (although I have only thirty desks total, it's quietly assumed that at least a couple of students will always be absent each day). Approximately 75 percent of the student population lists their mother or grandmother as sole head of the (rented) household (often low income apartment or duplex), where the average reading level falls somewhere around the fifth or sixth grade-if the student reads at all.

On my ten minute perfunctory welcome tour of the social studies department, I ask the retiring department head if he could let me into the school's chain-locked little theater. Annoyingly puzzled, he responds, "Why would you want to look around there? I don't know who has a key, it hasn't been used in years."

He seems much more interested in showing me the world studies textbook he's ordering en masse, the expensive hard-cover intrusion that will allegedly raise test scores if applied accordingly. I glance at the glossy pages, quickly noting two complete paragraphs about the first Gulf War. One colleague would later quip, "You've gone from teaching a university-like high school to baby-sitting a minimum-security middle school."

At the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, I remain here, six years later. among the "disadvantaged," still attempting to recapture that educational utopia, to see if anarchist or anti-authoritarian free schooling can informally flourish within the authoritarian chaos known as urban schooling. Teaching from a mix of lingering enthusiasm and confident subject knowledge is never enough to overcome massive inequity; this challenge inevitably involves student histories of poor nutrition, little or no exercise, and minimum-wage family subsistence, not to mention some with additionally abusive backgrounds.

What can a student-centered, anti-authoritarian teacher accomplish with such negative odds? If I stay teaching here, won't I succumb to the bitter cliche of the burned-out, over-idealistic teacher, full of resentment and resignation?

Common observations about the widespread resistance to radical reform would seem to discourage most liberal teachers in the front lines of poverty and race. "These kids only under-stand yelling at them, they're used to it, it's the only thing that works in their broken homes," a high school coach erroneously asserts, as I inquire about coaching baseball.

His disciplinarian desperation pervades the flipside of teacher indifference. When many of the students don't fear the police (who visit almost daily), threats from teachers or the principal's office sound empty indeed. I wonder, how can we teach "Anarchy 101" with a student population largely apathetic, if also frequently in trouble with the law? Or, more to the point: in public schools, do all free school teachers inevitably degenerate into public school authoritarians?

Part Three: Hidden free schooling within public schooling

In a school where most students seldom engage in any real group discussion, even within their own families, true dialogue is a major skill acquisition, and for some, an obvious therapeutic release, a fresh, communal entry into the world of critical and personal expression.

"Mr. B, can we blast now?" Antonia implores, after the class noisily rearranges their desks into a loose circle. Before I can say sure, she launches into a humorous diatribe about how one of her unnamed English teachers keeps swearing at them in class, while Antonia casually follows our simple "blasting" guidelines: "no names, one person at a time, and we yield to the raised hand and to the people who haven't spoken yet."

This informal hourly exercise might seem quite trite. Teaching the rules of formal debate offers a greater challenge-our student population has no debate class or debate club (and so what, I offer it anyway in virtually all my classes)-yet it also reveals surprising rewards, even if an incompetent or indifferent administration assumes such digressions are either too complex for "their children," or too far astray of their test-obsessed (authoritarian accountability) agenda.

The subtly supervised "blasting" example represents a paradox of teaching, particularly for those with strong anti-authoritarian leanings in poorer settings, because such deviations can fly against a favorite fiat of administrators (and their dutiful union enforcers): "You must follow orders (like teaching to the test-based curriculum) or it's insubordination!"

The temptation of self-censorship, to retreat from creative anti-authoritarian principles and practices, is often overwhelming-usually out of fear for non-tenured teachers and out of habit for tenured veterans. The old job security reminder, "Your position is secure as long as you don't strike or sleep with a student," may not sound reassuring. Yet while few professions have as high a turnover or burnout rate, few occupations can also foster such an open environment for significant change after the employee (the teacher) closes the door and begins working (the art of teaching, of opening other doors).

Here are nine modest practical educator suggestions, besides the perennial pleas for small class sizes and better administrative support, for helping create alternative free school environments within the typically underprivileged public school:

1) Make actual dialogue a persistent, top priority. Real discussion liberates as it transcends teacher-dominated lectures and test-directed formats.

2) Read, out loud, at least one provocative news article, brief essay, poem or short story a day (silent reading will not work with semi-illiterate students). The ultimate obstacle to dynamic education remains the video screen, the television at home, that erodes creativity, cultivates passivity and also helps feed obesity. You may be the only force encouraging such a liberating activity as reading. Rise to the occasion, and toss out the "mandatory" textbook for better literature (and art).

3) Befriend a co-worker (preferably several) with similar alternative interests. This may seem obvious, but staff friendships can blossom into cooperative teaching, where teachers go beyond sharing materials and resources, to potentially combining some of their classes (including shared discussions or presentations). The lone wolf approach of the quirky teacher in hiding ends up modeling isolation, instead of collective transformation.

4) Bring the outside world inside the classroom. Most school curriculums claim to promote community involvement, often through guest speakers, so bring them on: invite visitors, including ones who closely share your radical views, who can bring ideas into the room that might otherwise be rejected by students or reprimanded by administrators. Some of my more invigorating classroom discussions are triggered by lecturing cops and judges-especially just after they leave the room.

5) Strongly urge community involvement and evaluation. Related to #4, this is educator John Gatto's most avid radical reform, even if many districts have severely limited field trip budgets. Getting students out of the school, away from the TV and Play Station video, to then discover community involvement on their own, will be met with much early resistance, but once the term "community research" broadens, the potential for making critical connections intensifies. Neighborhood street fairs, local concerts, club raves, even house parties, can find their way into the class dialogue and onto paper as links to eventual community activism. Even many conservative schools are now requiring community service, so why not take up where the state leaves off?

6) Take at least one field trip to a more affluent school. Birmingham Seaholm and Oak Park High have enjoyed student exchange days with each other for five years. Such experiences permanently elevate the level of discussion and investigation for the rest of the school year. Most cities have similar economic divides. and most districts want to at least pay lip service to "diversity" (diversity clubs can be cute, but they're hardly effective if they stay only within the school). When such race lines are crossed, prepare yourself to be surprised by how much conversation shifts to class and income.

7) Demonstrate how to protest, even if you don't leave the classroom. An initial shock greets me each year I survey my students: almost all have no idea what civil disobedience is, or that many forms of protest are actually quite legal. When our school media center inexcusably closed for over a month for minor repairs, my students and I ended up picketing throughout the halls with their homemade signs. The media center reopened two days later. Most student feedback claimed it was their most exciting project all year. Half of my final exam (we're supposed to give some type of test) asks students to conduct a sit-in on the floor with the cause of their choice. No one ever fails that part of the exam, in case you're wondering.

8) If you are ordered to use some formalized testing assessments, try to use student-centered evaluations. There are many subtle options here, including cooperative exams written by the classmates (the final draft can still be organized by the teacher), as well as coinciding assessments of the instructor (thicker-skinned teachers, desiring maximum candor, may make this feedback anonymous).

These egalitarian approaches also demand resisting all high-stakes standardized testing by whatever means available (wealthy Birmingham kids simply have their parents write notes excusing them from the tests, but impoverished districts, more desperate for the potential trickle of funds, require more ingenuity). For further informational tips and inspirational ideas, find the rouge forum (originally founded in Detroit) at rougueforum.org.

9) Befriend select students. Some students will never like or trust the teacher, and vise-versa. Some kids could receive high wages for participating and they would still retain their animosity or apathy, for a variety of reasons. However, there should always be at least a few students you connect with on a more meaningful level each year. If you feel awkward inviting any into your home or neighborhood, share your email address or phone number. They could become a friend, a fellow radical, for a long time to come, while letting you know which of your lessons stand the test of time.

Of course, many of these proposals may seem like only liberal reformist pedagogy. None of my overcrowded and under-nourished students are preparing for an Ivy League university, and they won't be reading Crime and Punishment this year-but they may get exposed to Mutual Aid while reconsidering plans for enlisting in the military.

They will also be reading the latest issue of the Fifth Estate, and maybe some will bring it home for their mothers to read. Security guards and suspended cameras may clutter every hallway, but like most schools, they haven't started installing cameras in the classrooms. When that Orwellian development becomes a classroom fixture like the clock on the wall, it will be time to abandon the public school.

The revolution will not be televised, nor will it happen at the factory, once seen as the traditional flashpoint for mass upheaval. The revolution won't happen with factory schooling either, but it may begin through radical classrooms within liberal education. It did for me.

If there is any real hope for a deep human transformation it will be through the construction of communities of resistance against the current conditions of barbarism, and will most likely come from schools-or classrooms-that at least attempt to make such transformations, such elusive utopias, possible.

Tonight I'm supposed to meet up with two excited graduate seniors, Natalie and Nedra, at the Idle Kids anarchist space in Detroit, to catch a special screening of The Weather Underground documentary. I'm anxious to hear their review of Fahrenheit 9/11. Tomorrow, I plan on again trying to reach a former student who's now an interpreter somewhere in Baghdad. I hope she's still alive and unharmed. Long live the free classrooms.

—William Boyer

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[Thanks Bill, for all your help producing this issue.

—the Tennessee editorial group]

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