

# The Modern School Movement

## Anarchist educational ideas and practices offer many lessons

Michael Dunn

In the wake of the punitive No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top legislation of the Bush and Obama years, education reform has turned one hundred and eighty degrees. Today, many schools are implementing much more non-coercive practices, like restorative justice and culturally sensitive teaching.

These programs aim to make educators more empathetic to students' backgrounds and needs, so they can better mitigate the effects of racism, homophobia, sexism, and poverty in the classroom. Other popular current reforms include project- and inquiry-based activities that make students more active participants in their own learning.

[caption id="attachment\_7153" align="alignright" width="270"] Children's colony established by anarchists on grounds of former aristocratic hotel (David Porter, *Vision on Fire*, 1983)[/caption]

While this approach to teaching might seem new, it actually has antecedents that go back 250 years, to the work of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), a Swiss pedagogue and reformer who believed that every individual had the ability to learn and the right to an education. Many of the principles of modern pedagogy have their roots in his philosophy and practice, including the ideas of student-centered, inquiry-based learning, a focus on the child's interests and needs, cooperation and communication between teacher and parents, and active, rather than passive, learning.

Pestalozzi believed that children should learn by doing and they should be free to pursue their own interests and draw their own conclusions. This was in marked contrast to the typical pedagogy of the day (and how many of us were taught), in which the children learned entirely from books, lecture and rote repetition, often without understanding what they were memorizing.

Pestalozzi's teaching methods were also based on respect for his students' individual personalities and their personal dignity, as well as a strong belief in social justice and personal liberty. He encouraged classroom visits and participation by parents and believed strongly in regular communication with them about their children's progress.

Yet he opposed the concept of report cards, saying, "No child is to compare himself with others." He accepted children from all backgrounds, including those with emotional problems, and even opened a school for hearing impaired children.

His ideas became the basis for the pedagogies of Friedrich Froebel (inventor of kindergarten and Froebel Gifts), Paul Robin (founder of the Prevest Orphanage school in France), Francisco Ferrer (founder of the first Modern Schools in Spain) and many of the left libertarian educators that followed.

Paul Robin was an atheist, a Darwinist, and a member of the International Workingmen's Association. He eventually broke with the Marxists with their emphasis on engaging in political party building and sided with the anarchists—with their emphasis on self-governing workers' organizations.

In 1879, he returned to France, and was appointed head of the school at the Prevest Orphanage. There, he sought to coeducate boys and girls in a non-coercive, secular atmosphere at a time when the rest of French pedagogy

was steeped in religious and nationalist dogma. His school was supported by veterans of the 1871 Paris Commune, Louise Michel and Elysee Reclus, as well as Peter Kropotkin and Leo Tolstoy.

Following in Robin's footsteps, Francisco Ferrer (1859-1909) opened his first Modern School (Escuela Moderna) on September 8, 1901, in Barcelona, Spain. His book, *The Origin and Ideals of the Modern School*, argued for co-education, as well as for including the rich and poor.

During Ferrer's days, the Spanish literacy rate was only 50% and all schools were church-regulated. The teachers at the Church-run schools emphasized rote memorization of Catholic dogma, were hostile to any scientific and political thinking that displeased the Church, and often physically brutalized students. In contrast, Modern Schools purged their books of all religion and their curriculum was fully secular. These ideas were so popular that 40 more Modern Schools opened in Barcelona in just a few years, while 80 other schools adopted his textbooks.

Not surprisingly, Ferrer was vilified by both the church and the state. In 1906, when anarchist Mateu Morral threw a bomb at the Spanish king, the authorities arrested Ferrer and shut down his schools. Morral had worked in the library of one of the Modern Schools, but Ferrer had nothing to do with the assassination attempt.

Ferrer was eventually acquitted, but the authorities got another chance in 1909, when mass protests against Spanish intervention in Morocco grew into a general strike. The state responded with a wave of anti-worker terror and repression known as "The Tragic Week," during which over 600 workers were slaughtered by government forces. State prosecutors again blamed Ferrer, even though he was nowhere near Barcelona at the time. This time they succeeded, convicting him of instigating the riot and executing him later that year.

While in prison, Ferrer wrote the following on his prison wall: "Let no more gods or exploiters be served. Let us learn rather to love each other." When facing the firing squad, he bravely declared, "Aim well, boys. I know this is not your fault. Long live the Modern School!"

Ferrer's execution led to worldwide protests and organizing. Modern Schools began to pop up outside of Spain, inspired by his original Escuela Moderna. After his death, activists created more than 200 Modern Schools in Spain and 20 more in the U.S., one of which continued operating until 1958.

The creators of the American Modern Schools designed them to counter the discipline, formality and regimentation of traditional American schools. Regular working-class people ran the schools for the children of workers. They sought to abolish all forms of authority, including educational, with the goal of creating a society based on free association and free thought.

In 1910, anarchists formed the Francisco Ferrer Association (which later became the Modern School Association of North America), to spread Ferrer's teachings and build a network of Modern Schools in the U.S. Charter members included Emma Goldman, Leonard Abbott, and Harry Kelly.

By 1914 Modern Schools were operating in Philadelphia, Detroit, New York, Seattle, Portland, Chicago and Salt Lake City, with more soon to follow in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston and Paterson. They taught classes in English, Yiddish, Czech, Italian and Spanish.

While most of the Modern Schools lasted only a few years, the school in Stelton, New Jersey, lasted four decades.

Modern Schools emphasized learning by doing, as well as crafts and reading. They avoided rigid curricula, rote memorization and regimentation, as well as rewards and punishments. Modern School teachers and supporters believed that learning must be free, and felt that children needed to decide for themselves what to learn and how to learn it.

They also believed that learning was a life-long process that never ended. Therefore, parents and other adults were encouraged to participate in the operation of the schools and to attend evening and weekend lectures. Some of the speakers at these lectures included Clarence Darrow, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and Man Ray. The schools also served as cultural centers for the promotion of revolutionary unionism, free speech, sexual liberation, and anti-militarism.

In 1914, the progress of the schools was temporarily interrupted by political violence. After the Colorado National Guard attacked striking miners' families in Ludlow, killing 12 children and two women, a number of anarchists decided to seek revenge on John D. Rockefeller, owner of the mines.

A plot to assassinate Rockefeller was hatched by anarchists associated with the New York Ferrer Center. A bomb exploded prematurely, killing three anarchists. These events led to infiltration of the school and center by under-

cover cops. Visitors and families stopped coming to the school. As a result, organizers decided to move the school to rural Stelton in 1915, where it operated into the 1940s.

The last Modern School in America was in Lakewood, New Jersey. It operated from 1933 to 1958.

School districts today are struggling to find enough teachers to keep their classrooms open because of low wages, overwhelming workplace demands, and the continuing drive to privatize and homogenize education. This is only exacerbated by the stresses of teaching during a pandemic, in overcrowded, poorly ventilated classrooms, as colleagues and students' family members get sick and die. Today, more than ever, we need a rational, compassionate approach to education, like the Modern Schools provided.

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