

Champions of Libertarian Education

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Abstract

“Libertarian” education is a progressive educational approach which places a special emphasis on freedom. Throughout the history of compulsory schooling, several thinkers and educators have expressed concerns about certain aspects of educational systems in the United States and developed countries, and articulated alternatives. Some have opened “free schools” based on libertarian principles. Even while voices for education reform are raised in the United States, few consider the meaning and purpose of education beyond success or failure on standardized test scores. An attractive model for libertarian educational principles can be found in the unlikeliest of places, the tiny isolated Asian country of Bhutan. In the same way that their economic reforms are based on “Gross National Happiness” rather than GNP, their educational reforms are based on human welfare, environmental protection, and a stable society.

スピリ・ジョン

「リバタリアン」教育は、自由を重視する先進的な教育アプローチである。義務教育の歴史を通じて、米国や先進国の思想家や教育者たちは、教育システムの諸側面について懸念を表明し、代替の教育システムを提案してきた。そして、リバタリアンの原則に基づいた「フリースクール」が開設された。米国では教育改革の声が上がる一方で、標準化されたテストの点数の出来・不出来を超えて教育の意味や目的が考慮されることはほとんどない。リバタリアン教育原理の魅力的なモデルは、全く予想がつかないような場所、アジアの小さな孤立した国ブータンで見つかる。その経済改革はGNPよりもむしろ「国民総幸福量」に基づいているのと同様、その教育改革は、福祉、環境保護や安定した社会に基づいている。

Key words

libertarian, progressive, education, coercion, freedom, reform, Bhutan

Introduction

In the United States the term “libertarian” has come to be exclusively associated with right wing politics and politicians who make a career out of espousing the evils and inefficiencies of government. In this article, however, *libertarian* will be generally disassociated from that movement, and instead be akin to the kind of progressive education that writer and educator Alfie Kohn describes. Kohn’s (2008) foundational characteristics of progressive education are: Attending to the whole child; community; collaboration; social justice; intrinsic motivation; deep understanding; active learning; and taking kids seriously (“What it is” section, para. 3–10). As an amalgamate of those values, libertarian educators view children first and foremost as human beings with rights rather than objects to be prodded and manipulated.

Joel Spring

In *A Primer of Libertarian Education*, Joel Spring gives an overview of libertarian theory and practice of the past 100 plus years. Like the one obvious connection with libertarians in American politics, libertarian educators are concerned with freedom. Coercion, manipulation, and to a certain extent even control of the behavior of individuals, including (and in particular) children are considered anathema to building a society that hopes to progress beyond alienation, discrimination, poverty, and war. While Spring's *Primer* is generally focused on the distinction between education and schooling, in his quest to articulate the most fundamental problems of education and indeed of humanity, he includes commentary on child raising, psychology, and politics, in the end bringing his argument back to his main goal, finding ways to revolutionize American education. Spring and his philosophy will be discussed further in the Discussion section.

William Godwin

One of the first individuals to articulate a libertarian perspective was the British philosopher William Godwin. In the early 1900s Godwin noticed, to his dismay, that the decline in the power of monarchs was offset by the gaining of power by new elites. A champion of the power of human reason, Godwin feared that “the rise of the modern state and the development of national systems of education to produce citizens for that state—would have the effect of dogmatically controlling and stifling human reason (as cited in Spring p. 37).” Godwin foresaw the ways nations would promote patriotism and economic competition at all costs, and that the foundation for these problems was national schooling.

In *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, which was a polemic against political and educational institutions, Godwin wrote (Chapter VII “Of National Education,” para. 7), “It is not true that our youth ought to be instructed to venerate the constitution, however excellent; they should be led to venerate truth; and the constitution only so far as it corresponds with their uninfluenced deductions of truth.” One might infer that it was Godwin's influence that led his daughter Mary Shelley to write the classic novel *Frankenstein*, a book about alienation in a mechanized world.

John Taylor Gatto

Some 20 years after Spring published his *Primer*, the libertarian educator and two time winner of the New York state teacher of the year award John Gatto echoed Godwin's sentiments in his book *The Underground History of American Education*. Gatto traces the roots of public schooling to the early 1800s when Prussia, stung by defeats at the hands of Napoleon, was determined to create a docile and obedient public. Gatto quotes one of the Prussian fathers of public schooling, the philosopher Fichte who said that, “Education should provide the means to destroy free will.” Gatto goes on to explain,

The Prussian mind... held a clear idea of what centralized schooling should deliver: 1) Obedient soldiers to the army; 2) Obedient workers for mines, factories, and farms; 3) Well-subordinated civil servants, trained in their function; 4) Well-subordinated clerks for industry; 5) Citizens who

thought alike on most issues; 6) National uniformity in thought, word, and deed.

While Gatto taught in the public schools (as a “saboteur” in his words), Godwin attempted to implement his educational philosophy by starting an alternative school. Unfortunately it failed after a few short years.

Francisco Ferrer

Another libertarian’s efforts, however, came to fruition when the Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer founded the *Escuela Moderna* (the Modern School) in Barcelona in 1901, and wrote *The Origins and Ideals of the Modern School* in 1908. Like Godwin and later Gatto, Ferrer saw public schools as appendages of the state which aimed to produce, first and foremost, citizens who would obey the government. Ferrer wrote that governments wanted schools “not because they hope for the renovation of society through education, but because they need individuals, workmen, perfected instruments of labor to make their industrial enterprises and the capital employed in them profitable.”

In 1909 Ferrer was in effect martyred when Spain executed him, accusing him of leading an insurrection. In fact, one of his offenses was to start schools which, “explicitly taught children that militarism was a crime” (McCab cited in Ferrer, p. 5). Ferrer’s early and unfair demise inspired educators in Europe and the United States to open schools with aims similar to the Modern School, calling them by the same name, The Modern School.

Ivan Illich

Another champion of libertarian education was Ivan Illich who, like Leo Tolstoy, was a Christian proponent of libertarian education. Illich thought schools created (and then artificially elevated or prematurely crippled) self-images by encouraging competition and ranking students. Through education, “People learn to think of themselves as stupid or bright, as being worthy or as being failures” (Illich cited in Spring, p. 29). Illich called schools the “new church” because society’s faith was nearly complete and not based on reason. He wrote that schools dictate ways of thinking and define for young men and women what is legitimate and what is not. Accordingly, Illich thought that schools abused this excessive power: “The New World Church is the knowledge industry, both purveyor of opium and the workbench during an increasing number of the years of an individual’s life” (p. 47). The “workbench” comment is no doubt alluding to the ways in which modern schools are modeled on Ford’s assembly line factories, where subjects are fragmented and children treated like numbers in the same way factory workers are. Illich was particularly concerned about the plight of the poor, who not only didn’t benefit from national schooling, but suffered even more because of it. Illich’s criticisms of schooling even touched on second language learning and writing: “Most people who learn a second language well do so as a result of odd circumstances and not of sequential teaching (p. 13).” At every turn, Illich questions the edifice of schools and what they purport to accomplish.

Paulo Freire

One of the champions of libertarian education in the 20th century was the Brazilian educator/philosopher Paulo Freire. Freire was particularly concerned with the cultivation of awareness. If people living in poverty don't understand the mechanisms that create ultra-rich elite while essentially enslaving others, their lives are akin to animals, slogging through the grind cluelessly scrambling for a few scraps. A revolution could occur if individuals—both the oppressors and the oppressed—became aware of the ways power is used and abused in society.

Freire was especially concerned with materialism and the tendency of the oppressors to seek to “transform everything into objects of their purchasing power” (p. 58). This Brazilian educator coined the phrase the “banking concept of education” because he saw students being treated as objects to be molded and filled (with knowledge), and ultimately trained to be economic actors rather than autonomous individuals. “Education as banking is not liberating but contributes to the docility and alienation of the oppressed” (p. 86). Freire, like great philosophers of the past, emphasized the goal of knowing ourselves; through self-knowledge we can know the world. If learning is to be meaningful, it must have context in the life of the learner. Freire was also a humanist who saw love as the solution to educational and human problems. To Freire, love is not sentimental but rather “an act of freedom” (p. 90).

Discussion

At the heart of libertarian philosophy is the notion that humans should, from birth, have the chance to mature, learn, and grow without being subject to any form of indoctrination. Educators may be idealistic and well-intentioned in their efforts to create “good citizens” or even “good individuals” but it's this very objectification of children that is anti-education and in the end counter-productive. To libertarian educators, a child is a person worthy of the same respect due adults. With children in public schools, teachers constantly judge their performance; they often tell them what to think and what to believe (such as singing a national anthem); they have power to impede their progress not only by failing students for a year's work (in the United States), but also by documenting insubordination, satirized in rock and punk with lines like, *‘I hope you know this will go down on your permanent record’* by the Violent Femmes. As Gatto states, “What should make you suspicious about School is its relentless *compulsion* (p. 129).” Pupils are forced to answer bells to learn a dizzying array of facts which are often disconnected and de-contextualized. The game of schooling is based on a series of rewards and punishments to get students to know what adults have decided they need to know.

The notion of creating “good citizens” in public schools is, to libertarian educators, problematic at best. Disconcertedly, governments set and enforce the rules. For example, a government may order its citizens to fight in wars and kill the citizens of other states (who, meanwhile, are forced to fight as soldiers and kill). To libertarian educators, the state is an instrument of power for the dominant elite in a society. The only way the tragedy of warfare can continue in the modern world is for individuals to believe in the state—by accepting and being trained by its education system and its decrees.

Domination, Spring saw, does not always happen in overt tyrannical fashion. Rather, it could operate

in subtle ways. “Domination also referred to the ideal, the moral imperative that captured the loyalty of the individual... Patriotism and religious fervor were the results of people being possessed by ideals” (Spring pp. 40–41). This led Spring to conclude that: “Individuals in the modern world (are) driven creatures who sacrifice what they (are) for some ideal of what they ought to be.” The educator J. Krishnamurti makes a similar point about the psychological alienation that schools produce when he commented, “Such a training (such as the one of modern schooling) must inevitably bring confusion and misery to ourselves and to the world, for it creates in each individual those psychological barriers which separate and hold him apart from others (p. 13).” So in one case youth are made to feel alienated from themselves, and in another case feel alienated from each other.

While Spring’s *Primer of Libertarian Education* provides an excellent overview of libertarian philosophy, it gets bogged down a bit trying to explain the nature of the self, and, for example, the nature of human aggression. Wading through William Reich’s goal of the “self-regulating character” in the context of Marx’s sociology and Freudian theory brought the discussion too far into the psychological / political realm. For example, Reich and subsequent libertarians believed in sexual freedom, and believed the repression of pleasure led individuals to become violent or subservient to the state, an argument well distanced from education and public schools. Spring may also be questioned for his suggestion to remove the concept of childhood from consciousness. “Viewed as an object to be worked upon, the child becomes a focal point for the imposition of ideals and ideologies.” Spring claims that the concept of childhood is a very modern “invention”, beginning around the industrial revolution. Before that, children were simply people. Spring doesn’t, however, explain how educators would benefit from essentially rejecting the insights of educators such as Jean Piaget, who, through observation, described the stages of a child’s development. In the end, there is no canon of libertarian thought but a number of approaches which share the basic aim of greater freedom for children to learn without coercion.

A Primer of Libertarian Education ends by returning to the heart of the matter, education, and distinguishing it from “schooling.” “Schooling has been a planned method of socialization designed to produce obedient workers and citizens through a system of institutional controls. On the other hand, education can mean gaining knowledge and ability by which one can transform the world and maximize individual autonomy” (p. 145).

For some, the message of libertarian educators might appear too radical for the way it questions and criticizes the very foundation on which public schools are built. In any discussion of school reform in the United States, for example, the given in the argument is we need schools which can “compete internationally.” Competing internationally can be translated into “achieving high standardized test scores”—or even more accurately, “achieving standardized test scores that are higher than students in other countries.” The underlying assumption is we, as a nation, must win the battle of education, so we can win the battle of economics. These assumptions are, in the view of libertarian (and progressive) educators, deeply flawed. The popular documentary about school reform in the United States, *Waiting for Superman* explicitly quotes statistics showing how far the U. S. has fallen (in standardized tests). No other purpose of education is mentioned, and all schools, including newly instituted charter schools, are evaluated solely based on how effective they are in churning out students who score high on tests. This, of course, is hardly diabolical. High test scores do lead high school graduates to the prestigious colleges; a serious academic environment does

lead young men and women to success at institutions of higher learning, which in turn helps industry. More than anything, the discussion seems to be extremely limiting. Surely, education can offer something more.

Can a school based on libertarian principles exist in the modern world? Some private schools certainly contain elements of libertarian ideals. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the varied attempts to offer alternative education, from Montessori and Krishnamurti schools, one private school is worth mentioning in the context of libertarianism. The “Free School” in Albany, New York is aptly named because they offer no set curriculum at all. Instead students are given “complete freedom over their learning.” Children literally move freely throughout the facilities, playing when they want to play, studying what they want to study and when they want to study. Teachers are there to assist only when a request is made by a student. A main feature of the school is the utilization of a “council meeting.” A student or teacher may call a council meeting at any time to discuss, mediate and solve grievances (Root & Suchak, no date). Since the 1960s The Albany Free School has been one of several such experimental institutions around the world.

Examples like the Free School are interesting, but in terms of numbers, tiny. For example, according to the website, enrollment is generally under 100 students. A large scale example of a national policy that at least attempted to implement some libertarian educational principles did not exist until recently. The Asian country of Bhutan offers a such a provocative model, not only for its emphasis on Gross National Happiness rather than Gross National Product, and its plans to be 100% organic, but in its progressive approach to education. Canadian educator and author Donald Cameron describes Bhutan’s efforts to create a curriculum based on human values rather than economic development. In December 2009 the government arranged workshops, on gross national happiness and education, led by the world’s leading holistic educators. Discussion topics included education for sustainability, cultural richness, equity, ecology and citizenship. Cameron, who held meetings with the Bhutanese prime minister and attended the workshops, reports the Bhutanese newly articulated goal of education as developing “citizens who see clearly the interconnected nature of reality and understand the full benefits and costs of their actions, and care deeply for others and the natural world (9 : 48 to 10 : 01).” The goals were immediately accepted, and just several months later teachers began creating curriculum to help students achieve them. Bhutan’s prime minister himself commented on the goals of education, saying, “Success in life does not equal acquisition of wealth; that success in life is a state of being when one can come home at the end of the day satisfied with what one has done (13 : 48 to 14 : 07).” This strongly contrasts the frequently articulated goals of developed countries which stress the importance of competing internationally. The degree to which Bhutan’s educational system adopts libertarian principles by, at least, de-emphasizing standard exams and considering the whole child and the varied ways to develop his or her character and natural inclinations, remains to be seen. But the effort is unique and noteworthy for the way it ostensibly rejects the blueprint for educational success that the rest of the world has adopted (one that focuses on success with standardized exams with an eye towards the economic development of the country).

Educators who would like to see the transformation of existing social structures, especially schools, can benefit from considering the contributions of libertarian educators. In the face of societal concerns about falling test scores in the United States (and similar concerns in other developed countries such as Ja-

pan), we can consider fundamental questions about the meaning of education. Is there a way to educate students holistically and still prepare them for the challenges of the global economy? The repercussions of such a rethinking could affect not only the ways schools subject its students to tests, but also letter grades, homework, compulsory attendance, a lack of choice about subjects, pressure to conform, and the requirement to embrace beliefs unrelated to education, like reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Most importantly, such a rethinking would challenge educators to see the world from a child and teen's point of view, and consequently treat them with greater dignity and fairness.

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