

This article isolates and analyzes several philosophical misinterpretations of the philosophy of freedom in education current in the free school movement. It is easy to exaggerate one aspect of a philosophy in such a way as to violate its spirit; perhaps the most notable exaggeration common in the free school movement is the focusing on the removal of restrictions from the student to the neglect of providing opportunities for exploration and development desired by the student.

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SOME PITFALLS IN THE FREE SCHOOL MOVEMENT

As a movement progresses it becomes increasingly clear where its pitfalls are, and the free school movement is no exception. Soon after A.S. Neill published *Summerhill*¹ his American publisher was urging him to counteract a widespread misinterpretation by compiling a sequel, *Freedom — Not License!*² As the free school movement has grown and evolved, other misinterpretations of its basic educational philosophy also have become common mistakes, and critics have appeared from inside the movement as well as outside.³ It is now obvious that, good intentions notwithstanding, those struggling to create free schools can easily fall into many traps. Such an elusive concept as freedom is difficult to apply to life and to education.

The free school movement is based on a philosophy of freedom in education, which holds that each individual has the right to determine what he learns and does not learn. Each individual also has the right to determine when, where, and how he learns, but it is the question of who determines what is learned that causes others to part company with those who believe in free schools. The philosophical pitfalls in the free school movement perhaps can be explained best as misinterpretations or exaggerations of some aspect of this philosophy of freedom in education. For this reason we need first a summary of such a philosophy of life and of education.⁴

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¹A.S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Childrearing* (New York: Hart, 1960).

²A.S. Neill, *Freedom — Not License!* (New York: Hart, 1966), p. 7-9.

³A well-known example of such criticism from the inside is Jonathon Kozol, *Free Schools* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

⁴For examples of other expositions of a philosophy of freedom in education, see Neill, *Summerhill*; John Holt, *Freedom and Beyond* (New York: Dell-Delta, 1972), pp. 6-114; Allen Graubard, *Free the Children* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 3-38; Carl R. Rogers, *Freedom to Learn* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1969), see esp. pp. 221-296; Paul Goodman, "Freedom and Learning: The Need for Choice," *Saturday Review*, 51, no. 20 (May 18, 1968), p. 73-75; Elizabeth Byrne Ferm, *Freedom in Education* (New York: Lear Publishers, 1949); Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy on Education*, trans. Leo Weiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), see esp. pp. 3-31, 152-190, and George Dennison, *The Lives of Children* (New York: Random House, 1969) see esp. pp. 3-34, 99-118, 192-213, 246-269.

Freedom is a moral philosophy of relationship. It holds that might does not make right, rather each individual should have an equal right to do, be, believe, and feel as he chooses. The philosophy of freedom in education holds that each individual, therefore, should have the right to learn and become what he so chooses, that is, that children should have the same right to freedom as adults. Restrictions on this right should be minimized and the opportunity to fulfill it should be maximized. Freedom, then, becomes both freedom from restrictions and freedom of opportunity, and each individual has the responsibility to work towards both of these goals for himself and for every other individual.

Restrictions can be natural as well as humanly imposed, of course. Natural restrictions come from our human condition and must be dealt with. We cannot fly by flapping our arms no matter how hard we flap. Imposed restrictions are created by other people in their desire to control us by choosing our behavior for us, for example, by forcing on us a certain morality or by forcing us to learn the multiplication tables. Such restrictions should be minimized. They cannot be completely eliminated, since in an extreme case of dependence one might still restrict the dependent person for his own safety. For example, even an individual who believes in freedom would pull a two year old toddler out of the path of an oncoming car, even against vociferous objection, since it is obvious that the toddler does not know and does not want one of the consequences of his act, namely injury or death.

An individual's behavior also should be restricted to avoid license, the interference with another's right to do or be what that other so chooses. If we did not relate to each other this would be easy, but we do relate and very much want to. The goal in relationships, and of conflict resolution within relationships, then becomes to maximize what each person in the relationship sees as positive influence from the other and minimize what each sees as negative. The responsibility of each is to work toward an arrangement that best accomplishes this. Determining such an arrangement is a difficult and continuing process between the people involved. Whether an act is license or not cannot be determined outside of a particular relationship, since it is the desires of the individuals concerned that determine the licentiousness of any particular act.

Restriction talks of what we cannot do, opportunity of what we can. Freedom implies that others should not only refrain from decreasing our choices, but they should also help increase them. A lack of restrictions may still leave us in a sterile environment. Essential to freedom are the opportunities to fulfill one's needs and desires, and a free environment includes both as many opportunities as possible and help in connecting the individual to the opportunities. There is an important distinction here between exposure and coercion, however. An individual does not know all possible opportunities he may use to fulfill his needs and desire. He may want and need help, but this help should never take the choice away from the individual. A "teacher," then, becomes a facilitator, helping the "student" evolve and develop according to the student's desires and choices.

With this summary of what freedom is, it will now be easier to show what it is not. The following misinterpretations are common in the free school movement and are usually the result of a tendency to focus on one aspect of this educational philosophy to the exclusion of others. Perhaps such distortions should not be surprising, though, or even discouraging, in a movement that is struggling for a new way of life and education.

FREEDOM VS. THE DEPRIVATION OF OPPORTUNITIES

The neglect or refusal to provide the opportunities a child is or will become interested in is perhaps the most common failing in the free school movement.⁵ A concern for freedom typically focuses on the elimination of all control. It is easy then, to decide that all influence is control and to refuse to interact with the children to the point of eliminating opportunities as well as restrictions. Children want to relate, and they want help in meeting and dealing with the world. We have as much responsibility to provide them with adult relationships and to help them find and take advantage of other opportunities as we do to not restrict them. If a child is essentially in control of his life, he knows it and will ask us to step back when our influence is seen by him as interference. It is the child's right to determine whether our influence is interference or opportunity, not ours.

The most common symptom of such a deprivation of opportunities is the sterility of many free schools. Free schools should be rich in materials and experiences, but often the choices open to the children are severely limited. Financial and other external limitations are unavoidable, but holding back opportunities for fear of controlling is often a mistake. Free school teachers, for example, sometimes insist that all materials should be brought in by the students and that all activities and experiences should be initiated by them. Such a position deprives the children of interacting with the knowledge, experiences, interests, and abilities of the adults around them and gives them none of the help they may want in finding and making use of opportunities that will interest them.⁶

It is impossible to provide unlimited opportunities, thus the selection of opportunities we provide will indeed influence the children's choices in ways we may not even understand. It is essential that such influence be minimized and that any conscious attempt to control or mold by the opportunities we provide be eliminated. It is also important that children learn how to recognize and protect themselves from such control. But beyond this we must relate to each other as real people with knowledge, abilities, and feelings.

⁵For Jonathon Kozol it is also the most irritating. Jonathon Kozol, "Free Schools: A Time for Candor," *Saturday Review*, 55, no. 10 (March 4, 1972), pp. 51-54.

⁶For a discussion of this tendency in free schools to pull back from any influence on the children, see Suzanne S. Fremon, "Why Free Schools Fail," *Parent's Magazine*, 47, no. 9 (September 1972), p. 96. It must be noted, however, that Fremon tends to distrust freedom in education and free schools, where, "there is no assurance that [children] will learn to be knowledgeable, competent adults (p. 98)." Graubard also notes that free schools often acquire more structure as they get older in an effort to deal with this tendency towards sterility. Graubard, *Free the Children*, p. 156-157.

Children typically want, and deserve, help in learning about the world. We adults have the responsibility to give them that help, even though we are committed to allowing and encouraging them to choose their own way.

FREEDOM VS. ABANDONMENT

A more serious form of deprivation of opportunities is the blatant ignoring of the adult responsibility to help dependent children come into their own independence. Those who see the need for freedom often want freedom primarily for themselves and, therefore, may also want to free themselves from the responsibility of raising their own children. If freedom is the byword of such parents, their children are often left to a free school to raise while the parents rush into radical politics or other personal interests. Such parental abandonment is common in all schools, of course. Free schools, however, tend to attract such parents who profess a philosophy of freedom in child-rearing. There may, indeed, be few restrictions placed on the children by the parents, but freedom from restrictions is only half of what freedom involves. In such a situation the children are deprived of close relationships with adults, which perhaps is one of the most important opportunities a child wants and needs while growing up.⁷

FREEDOM VS. THE TEACHING OF RADICAL VALUES

The proselytizing of radical moral or political values is not consistent with a philosophy of freedom in education in any sense. It is sometimes proclaimed as consistent with and even essential to such a philosophy because those proselytizing the values are teaching something that was taboo for them. However, if we prohibit traditional values while encouraging new values, we have not increased the freedom of choice, and it is such a freedom to choose one's own values that is essential to freedom.⁸ Since the proselytizing of radical values is common in the counter-culture, it often finds its way into the free school movement. A notorious example of this was the take over of the Summerhill Society in 1970 by an internal group of counter-culturists which called itself the Summerhill Collective.⁹

FREEDOM VS. OPEN EDUCATION

The difference between free schools and open schools is often confused, because both allow children more freedom than schools have traditionally allowed.¹⁰ There is, for example, general agreement between free and open

⁷Rasberry and Greenway see much abandonment as often perpetuated by parents who are forcing their lonely counter-culture stance on their children — the alienated forcing aloneness and alienation on others. Salli Rasberry and Robert Greenway, *Rasberry Exercises: How to Start Your Own School — and Make a Book!* (Sebastopol, California: Freestone, 1970), p. 59.

⁸This is a point Neill, for example, is adamant about. See Neill, *Freedom — Not License!*, pp. 90-93.

⁹The orientation of the Summerhill Collective towards proselytizing radical values is obvious in the new *Summerhill Bulletin* it began publishing after its takeover of the Summerhill Society, which had published *The Summerhill Society Bulletin*. See, for example, the *Summerhill Bulletin* of November-December 1970.

¹⁰John Holt, for example, argues that the difference is negligible. Holt, *Freedom and Beyond*, pp. 49-50.

education that students should be free to determine when and how they learn. The point of difference is who decides *what* is to be learned. In free schools it is the student who decides. In open schools the teacher retains a significant control over what the student is to learn. A common goal in open education is to teach the student to read when he is ready. In free schools the student decides whether he learns to read as well as when.

Open education advocates believe that freedom for the student to determine, at least to a large degree, when and how he is to learn specific knowledge or skills will help the student learn better. They also believe that to a certain extent each student has the right to learn what interests him. Nonetheless, certain basics — like reading, writing, and arithmetic — are considered essential for everyone to learn. It is only in considering how and when these basics are learned that the open school advocate focuses on self-determination by the students. In addition, the open school teacher also retains significant control over what the student learns in other areas, although a strong emphasis is put on a student's interests as well as his "needs" — as determined by the teacher. A common method of managing such a cooperative control over what the student learns is the contract, where the student is allowed to learn for credit — and often is held accountable for learning — what the teacher and the student have both agreed upon. This allows the student as well as the teacher to propose learning goals and activities, yet it also keeps the power of limitation and guidance in the teacher's hands. In the end, open schools tend to evaluate their success in terms of what and how much each student has learned.¹¹

Free school advocates believe that what an individual learns essentially affects no one but himself and, therefore, should be determined by and for himself. A teacher may argue the importance of learning specific skills or knowledge, but it is the student who decides what he learns. Free schools, then, tend to evaluate their success not by evaluating the accomplishments of the students but by evaluating the educational environment to see if it has excited and satisfied each child's interests and desires without determining his choices for him.

To the open school advocate, free schools have abdicated their responsibility to guide children as they grow up. To the free school advocate, open schools merely sugar-coat an insidious form of control.

FREEDOM VS. OVERPROTECTION

Overprotection of children from the real world around them is a pitfall in all childrearing philosophies, because to some extent all philosophies perceive children as dependent and therefore in need of protection for their own safety. Upper middle class North America, for example, tends to over-

¹¹Barbara Blitz, *The Open Classroom: Making It Work* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1973) is a representative example of the open school philosophy. She describes at some length the importance of freedom to open education (p. 54-79), but when she discusses evaluation (p. 252-256) it is clear that the teacher determines the "goals" and "specific educational objectives," while the student determines the "pace and level."

protect its young from some of the realities of the world — such as sex, death, poverty, social conflicts, and personal problems. The large upper middle class segment of the free school movement inherits this overprotective stance to some extent, although it sometimes overreacts against it.¹²

A more inherent cause of overprotection in the free school movement, however, comes from the fact that the philosophy of freedom in childrearing is a minority philosophy to society. Until children learn how to protect themselves from adults who desire to control them, other adults must protect them. Since most adults in our society believe children should be controlled and usually have the power to enforce this belief, the need to protect children in free schools from controlling adults can lead to an isolation from the outside world. Some feel that a self-contained boarding or community school like Summerhill is too isolated from the surrounding Society.¹³ And others have pointed out that free schools often become self-consciously antagonistic toward the surrounding society.¹⁴ If the child does not learn to understand and deal with the world as it is, then the protection indeed has gone too far. This need for protection in a society that generally does not believe in freedom for children is a real problem, however — one that those who believe both in freedom and deschooling, by the way, have not solved. Both Illich's and Reimer's proposed society-wide learning networks, for example, assume a philosophy of freedom in education. Yet, as they themselves so eloquently argue, the societies that these networks are to be a part of do not believe in freedom in education.¹⁵

Free schools, on the other hand, are also somewhat less likely to overprotect children than other types of schools. One goal of the philosophy of freedom in education is to help each child become independent in as many ways and as quickly as possible, since dependence means some control of one person by another. A child raised in freedom, then, becomes independently capable faster and is exposed to the "real world" as fast as he can deal with it and still manage self-protection. To live in freedom one needs to be protected from the control exerted by others, but in many ways this fairly quickly can become self-protection.

FREEDOM VS. LICENSE FOR STUDENTS

The pitfalls of allowing freedom to extend to license can appear in several forms, depending on who is allowed license. The allowing of license to the children themselves is the form Neill argued against in *Freedom — Not License!*¹⁶ Freedom does not mean that a child has the right to interfere with the fulfillment of another child's desires or to rule the adults around

¹²Kozol, for example, criticizes such overprotection, but he in turn can be criticized for overreacting against it. See Kozol, "Free Schools: A Time for Candor," and *Free Schools*.

¹³For Neill's acknowledgement of this accusation and his defense, see Neill, *Summerhill*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁴See, for example, Rasberry and Greenway, *Rasberry Exercises*, p. 67.

¹⁵See Ivan D. Illich, *De-Schooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) and Everett Reimer, *School is Dead: Alternatives in Education* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971).

¹⁶Neill, *Freedom — Not License!*, pp. 11-26.

him, even if those adults have taken on the responsibilities of parenthood or teaching.¹⁷ True, the parent or teacher may be responsible for protecting a child from control and for providing opportunities for development and fulfillment, but this does not make the adult a slave to the child. When children are allowed to bully each other or the adults around them and demand the satisfaction of their every whim at any cost to others, freedom has degenerated to license. Since in the rest of society adults often bully children, it is easy to overreact in trying to rectify this situation. Typical examples of such license are the allowing of a child to destroy materials that belong to others or to the group and the allowing of a child to demand the attention and participation of an adult no matter how tired or preoccupied the adult may be. A student has gone too far when he focuses on "doing his own thing" with no regard for helping others to do theirs, and such a tendency is so widespread in the movement that many alternative high schools now speak of individual responsibilities rather than freedom when interviewing students.¹⁸

This issue is often confusing to those who read Neill, because he sometimes would allow and even encourage such licentious behavior as breaking the school's windows, stealing, and throwing mud at Neill's door.¹⁹ When a child had come from a controlling background, Neill would adopt such an approach to prove to the child that he was now indeed in a free situation and, thus, to dissolve resentment and spur the development of a sense of fairness. Now the child would not only be free to make all decisions for himself, but he also would have to take responsibility for all his actions and learn to control his licentious behavior. Others were no longer going to take this responsibility for him. Once secure in freedom an individual does not need such therapy. He can accept another individual pointing out his slip into license without resenting the complaint as a restriction on his own freedom.²⁰

FREEDOM VS. LICENSE FOR TEACHERS

The free school movement has shown that it is not only students that can exhibit license. Sometimes teachers focus more on themselves than on the students. Although teachers have rights as individuals to being treated fairly, a teacher exists as a teacher to help students discover and develop their interests. A teacher has gone too far when he concentrates on his interests or his problems rather than on helping the students with their interests and problems.²¹ A teacher in a free school has no right, for example, to be very

¹⁷See Robert C. Riordan, *Alternative Schools in Action* (Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa, 1972), p. 24-25, for a description of the difficulties over this issue at the Cambridge Pilot School.

¹⁸Don Moore, "National Conference Challenges Popular Myths of Alternative Schools Movement," *Changing Schools*, no. 003 ([1972]), pp. 9-10.

¹⁹See Neill, *Summerhill*, pp. 10-11, 35-36, 119.

²⁰For Neill's explanation of this therapeutic technique, see Neill, *Freedom — Not License!*, pp. 103-105, 173-175, and Neill, *Summerhill*, pp. 106, 119.

²¹Fremon sees a tendency in the free school movement to attract teachers who are seeking an atmosphere of freedom and love more for themselves than for the children. Fremon, "Why Free Schools Fail," p. 96.

concerned with the fulfillment of his own psychological needs, to limit the students' activities to what the teacher likes to do, or to become sexually involved with a student if it is the teacher's desire and not the student's that is the motivating force. It is the student who is to guide his own life, not the teacher, no matter how "freeing" the teacher may think his guidance to be.

FREEDOM VS. LICENSE FOR PARENTS

License is sometimes taken by parents, as well, who inflict their own desires or psychological conflicts on their children or on the school. Perhaps the most unfortunate form of this is the abandonment of a child to a free school that was mentioned previously, for this often is combined with allowing the child license, and license without love is perhaps the most hurtful misapplication of the philosophy of freedom in childrearing of all. But parents also sometimes act as if freedom in education means that they are free to inflict their control on their child's school. Often, as Rasberry and Greenway point out, such over-involvement of parents in their child's education or in the free school as a whole grows unintentionally out of a real concern to help.²² However, a free school is a fragile creation when it is first developing, and many do not last past this stage. Everpresent or anxious parents can provide more distraction and conflict than support, especially if the parents are in any way insistent about their vision of what a free school should be. A free school does not belong to the parents, nor to the teachers for that matter, but to the students.

All these pitfalls do not make freedom a mistake or even unattainable, but they do make it more difficult to ensure than many of us had hoped. Freedom works, but it must really be freedom.

²²Rasberry and Greenway, *Rasberry Exercises*, p. 63.