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# The price of a free school

By Harry Eyres

Feedback?

Of course the idea sounds grand – but free from what? Or, more importantly, free for what?



Pupils in the playground at the opening of West London Free School earlier this month

At this time of year there is always talk of education. The autumn term has started; some children are entering school for the first time; others are making the transition from primary to secondary; young adults are being driven, with bulging bags and cases, to halls of residence by parents who may be more traumatised than they are. And this year, at least in the UK, there is more talk than ever, because education is being “shaken up” by [Michael Gove](#), a notably driven and idealistic, and ideological, education secretary; and also by a universities minister, [David Willetts](#), of legendary intellectual firepower. A new class of “free schools” has been created; the whole system of university education has been rethought, or at least put on a different financial footing.

Of course the idea of free schools sounds grand – but free from what? Or, more importantly, free for what? Trying to get some perspective on what this idea of freedom might mean, I found myself looking back to two inspiring experiments in education, both of which were conducted in Madrid before the Spanish Civil War.

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The more famous of the two was the Residencia de Estudiantes – the arty version of an Oxbridge college at which Lorca, Buñuel, Dalí, Falla and others spent time in the 1920s and 1930s, and which served as a seedbed for much of the burgeoning artistic creativity of that brilliant, short-lived time.

But the less well-known Institución Libre de Enseñanza, or Free Institute of Education, founded in 1876 by Francisco Giner de los Ríos, is possibly more relevant to my theme. In this case the word “free” meant very specifically free

from the dead hand of state and religious control. The Spanish “Glorious Revolution” of 1868 had promised a more modern, secular, scientific model of education; but the Restoration of 1874 brought back not only the Bourbons but a repressive, state-controlled education system in which the minister dictated the choice of textbooks and curriculum, and forbade the teaching of non-Catholic religious doctrine or critical political ideas.

Against all that Giner de los Ríos set his vision of a free school, whose idea of freedom went rather further and deeper than anything envisaged by Toby Young or Michael Gove. It was funded not by the state but by public subscription, mainly from the liberal middle class. Giner de los Ríos discouraged the use of textbooks and was thoroughly suspicious of all examinations. According to a former pupil “he only aimed at one thing: to shake the pupil out of his torpor, stir him up to independent investigation, to working the thing out by himself; and above all he recommended games, art and the country”.

A more famous ex-pupil, the great poet Antonio Machado, was especially struck by his human presence and example: “In the infants class he always sat among his pupils and worked with them familiarly and lovingly ... His teaching method was Socratic: simple and persuasive dialogue. He stimulated the soul of his students – adults and children – so that knowledge should be thought and lived by them, for themselves.”

When Giner de los Ríos died in 1915, Machado, in a moving elegy, imagined his parting words to those he had inspired: “Mourn me in work and hope/ Be good, no more than that./ Be what I have been among you: soul.” If that sounds wishy-washy, the reality was far from it: the pupils of the Institución Libre became doctors, teachers, scientists, writers – the intellectual backbone of a reformed Spain.

The Residencia de Estudiantes was the spiritual offshoot of the Institución Libre, and its aim, according to John Brande Trend, later to become Professor of Spanish at Cambridge, was “to awaken curiosity ... to arouse a desire to learn and the power to form personal judgments instead of accepting what others say”.

How do the ideas behind the new free school movement in the UK, and the recent white paper on higher education, compare with such deep and rich



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conceptions of human freedom? There are superficial similarities, particularly in the emphasis on excursions and character-building. Giner de los Ríos was an aficionado of long country walks, and of British sports such as cricket and rugby, and he regularly took pupils out of Madrid on Sundays. Pupils at the West London Free School spent their first day, according to the London Evening Standard, “developing adventure skills to help them become entrepreneurs”. But here it sounds as if freedom and character-building are being channelled in a very particular direction.

What I find lacking, both in the free school movement and the increasingly business-oriented view of higher education, is a sense of the non-instrumental joy of learning – of the awakening of intellectual curiosity, the ability to navigate the infinite seas of inquiry, as ends in themselves, the crown and the laurel wreath of human flourishing.

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