

*DOSSIER*

**90 YEARS OF FREEDOM – AFTER SUMMERHILL:  
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PUPILS OF  
BRITAIN’S MOST RADICAL SCHOOL?**

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Submission: 01/06/2015

Review: 05/09/2015

Acceptance: 05/09/2015

**Abstract:** In this paper, the author brings highlights from his book “After Summerhill”. Its main purpose is to describe the main concepts about Summerhill education and to find out its outcomes. In short, the author seeks to answer “what happened to the pupils”.

**Keywords:** democratic schools. Summerhill alumni. Freedom.

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## **What happened to the pupils of Britain's most radical school?**

Looking back on the long journey I set out on to discover the answer to the above, I suppose these words from a former pupil impressed me more than any other: “Summerhill wasn’t really about education, it was about finding out about yourself – really finding out about yourself, and being accepted for who you are. That was the most important thing about Summerhill”. This was said by Tom, a young man with learning difficulties. If any one person convinced me of the value of Summerhill, he did.

As Mark Twain famously said, “You should never let your schooling get in the way of your education”. That is the heart of Summerhill. It isn’t really about schooling – it is about education in its broadest sense.

I found the picture of Summerhill presented by its founder A.S. Neill in his different books enormously attractive. It struck me as a portrait of a community that was able to organise itself according to principles which in many ways seem at variance with society at large, and yet created happy, fulfilled people. The question loomed – what happened to them afterwards?

Every society has its own ideas about how best to prepare its young for dealing with the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood. Ideas are constantly being revised and modified – never more so than today when the society the child is about to enter is undergoing such bewildering and accelerating change.

Neill’s apparently absurdly naïve answer to all this was – do all you can to ensure the child has a happy childhood, free from coercion, and everything else will fall into place: promote happiness and all will be well. But the question remains, how do you promote happiness? For Neill, when he founded his school in 1921, it was a case of letting the child decide what it wants to do. If it wants to play all the time, let it. Trust the child to find its own way, and as much as possible stay out of the way. Children learn anxiety from adults, so don’t

interfere. Rather than the three Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic) promote the three Fs: freedom, fresh air and fresh food.

This is all very well, you will say, but how do you prevent selfishness and anarchy? Neill's answer was self-government. Disputes and chaos are dealt with by democracy in action. At Summerhill there are the weekly meetings, mostly chaired by one of the children, where the whole community gathers to debate issues, reach decisions and pass or amend laws by voting.

As for laziness, Neill's response was that no free child was ever lazy – only uninterested or unwell. But of course it isn't that simple. Or perhaps it is, but not that simple to live, as I found out during the course of my conversations with old Summerhillians.

And this was what led me to engage with the undertaking of this book<sup>15</sup>. I wanted to find out two things – how did Summerhill work in practice and what were the long-term effects? Because the success of any endeavour should ultimately be judged by its outcomes.

How different was the experience of Summerhillians to those in mainstream schooling, and how did it affect them in their lives subsequently? What qualities, if any, did they have that marked them out as being different from those who underwent conventional schooling in terms of their capacity to prevail?

Naturally, I decided that I'd better take a look at the school. The place was quite scruffy, which I found reassuring. No false front. (I should mention it has considerably smartened up since then; a great mistake according to some former pupils). The children were not like any other group of kids I'd seen. They seemed unusually relaxed and self-contained. They didn't put on any airs or show any deference or hostility or suspicion towards any of the adults. Indifference isn't the word – 'ease' describes it better. I had the feeling they

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<sup>15</sup> LUCAS, Hussein. *After Summerhill: what happened to the pupils of Britain's most radical school?* Published by Herbert Adler.

would behave exactly the same whether there were adults or strangers around or not. There were no signs of aggression. Also, they hadn't that air of being in captivity, which is the feeling I get from so many kids in a school environment. They were just getting on with things in a very relaxed manner.

At the same time there was something unnerving about it all – because it was something I had never previously encountered. And I suppose the key to it is freedom. In retrospect I think I was experiencing the fear of freedom that the philosopher-psychologist Erich Fromm writes about. It is unnerving because it is so seldom encountered, so you don't quite know how to adapt to it. Apparently many adults, when they visit Summerhill, behave in strange and sometimes bizarre ways. It seems to me that if your whole life experience has been one of having your freedom curtailed, and you have developed a way of being derived from that, then to encounter a society that has a completely different ethos is likely to disorientate you. But above all my recollection is one of a feeling of exhilaration. I felt I had found what I was looking for, and it was real. Because you never know with books that inspire you, whether you can trust the reality they purport to describe.

More than anything, what struck me about the school (or perhaps community is a better word) is its tremendously down-to-earth quality. It's about people getting on with things without other people telling them what they should be doing; and learning how to live with others. In the end, it's about having faith in human nature and above all trusting that the child will find its own way. That's how Summerhill avoids a culture of conformity and anxiety.

But it was the long-term outcomes I was most interested in. I've met and interviewed a lot of old Summerhillians, many more than appear in the book, and been very impressed with all of them. They are diverse, but what they have in common is that they come across as authentic personalities who are generally content with their lives. I feel that they know who they are and are really speaking from themselves. They're not trying to impress because they have

nothing to prove. As children they've never been judged and found wanting – at least not during their time at Summerhill. There's something very straightforward and direct about them. They speak as they find and as they feel, yet they're not without sensitivity. There's no obliqueness or hidden agenda. No concealment. As one former pupil observed, "This is nothing like the world of Harold Pinter."

Regardless of their level of intellectual ability, they come across as intelligent in the sense of possessing 'an enhanced capacity for the enjoyment of life' as I once heard intelligence defined. I suppose today you would say they have high levels of emotional intelligence. They haven't felt the need to be self-consciously different or to rebel, because they haven't been required to conform. They know who they are because they've been free to find out.

The evidence suggests that being at Summerhill doesn't lead to your being all at sea when you go out into the world at large, although some of them have spoken of a difficult period of transition. Adjusting to the sick world, I would say, to the majority who suffer from what Wilhelm Reich called 'the emotional plague'. It's evident that Summerhillians can adapt; they are very flexible without actually compromising their integrity; they can be direct without being impolite, or even more important, inconsiderate.

And for those of you who fear Summerhill may not nurture a child's intellectual development, here is a quote from the late David Barton, who was a professor of mathematics at Queen Mary, University of London, where he said, "I learnt to do my thinking at Summerhill." As Neill said, "Set free the emotions and the intellect will look after itself."

I've met people from Summerhill who admit that they were terrible, almost frightening as kids. Yet as adults they're fine. So it's not principally what Summerhillians are like as kids, it's how they are when they are adults that's most impressive. That's how I feel education should be judged: not how many paper qualifications you've got but what you are like as a human being when

you're 60 and whether you have the courage and human resources to engage with life. As one former pupil put it: "Above all, Summerhill has given me a fundamental sense of wellbeing which has lasted throughout my life."

If you have a free and happy childhood it's an inner resource you still draw on when you're 80. A well that never runs dry.

When I first read *Summerhill* by A.S. Neill I thought it the truest, most insightful, down-to-earth and honest depiction of human nature that I'd ever come across. Over 50 years later I haven't changed my mind.

**Paper based on the book:** HUSSEIN, L. **After Summerhill:** what happened to the pupils of Britain's most radical school. UK: Herbert Adler, 2011.