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ADDRESSING DIFFERENCES IN LEARNING READINESS AND STYLES

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Abstract: There are many different ways to think about Summerhill and A. S. Neill's philosophy of education. My intent here is not to add to the academic literature about Summerhill or Neill's ideas, but to offer some brief thoughts and ideas based on my own experiences and observations. This experience includes attending Summerhill for a year when I was a teenager and later (much to my surprise) spending my entire adult life in academia. I focus on one aspect of education that is implicit in, but possibly goes beyond, some of Neill's ideas: The differences in the ways each of us absorb and process information, particularly in an academic setting.

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I am a professor at a highly prestigious university, have a doctorate in sociology and a masters degree in public health, yet the truth is that, while I love discovery and learning, I've never liked formal schooling. It was my dislike of high school that brought me in contact with Summerhill. My parents had read and were very sympathetic with the ideas in Neill's then new book "Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing." When I dropped out of high school, Summerhill seemed like a possible alternative (of my many academic accomplishments, a high school diploma is not one of them).

Why did I refuse to attend high school? To this day I'm not quite sure, though I think that I've come to understand that I was then dealing with two interacting issues. First, I had a heavy dose of teenage angst and confusion. Perhaps equally important, and I did not fully understand this until many years later, standard teaching methods, particularly lectures and structured assignments, what might be called linear learning, were inconsistent, to the point of being incompatible, with the way I learn and integrate information.

The usual description of Summerhill inevitably includes the word freedom, used positively by supporters and often negatively by detractors. Neill later clarified his original description of freedom by adding the qualifying phrase "without license," presumably to counter criticism that he was supporting and implementing ideas akin to fantasies about "noble savages." When I arrived at

Summerhill I found a vibrant democratic community, that included, somewhat to my surprise, numerous written and unwritten rules. In many ways, the social environment was more structured than I had previously experienced. It felt more like an extended family than a school.

Perhaps lost in the controversy over the meaning and scope of the term freedom as it applies to education, however, is a key, if implicit, idea: Intellectual and emotional development are not as linear or congruent as grade levels and achievement tests imply and demand. Rather, an ideal learning environment should address individual needs, talents, and desires, and be as free as possible from the restrictions that grade-level assignments and testing require. The underlying goal should be learning at a pace appropriate to a child's emotional, cognitive, and intellectual development and needs.

There is increasing recognition that children differ in the timing of their intellectual and cognitive development, and today's vastly expanded arsenal of learning environments and devices ought to equate with more opportunities for creative education that address these differences. The idea of "learning styles" has also received increasing attention, particularly with the advent of computer and web-based education. What is not apparent, however, is that these ideas have been incorporated into educational practices to address a child's readiness for learning or the recognition that some children may be, for example, "visual" and/or "auditory" learners.

It took me many years to understand that I'm a visual learner, and would rather gain information through reading and doing than by attending a lecture. For me, and I suspect many others, reading an article or book is a much better way to explore evidence and ideas, especially since it allows one to go back a few pages or jump to other sections to review related concepts and information. I would have done much better being assigned a set of books to read, checking-in occasionally with the teacher, and being examined on the subject when the teacher and I both concluded I was ready.

This is not to argue that all schools should become "Summerhills," but rather that a rethinking of the grade level and age-related achievement structure of standard education would be a step in the direction of providing a richer and more motivating educational environment for all children, including the ones, like me, who for whatever reason have a difficult time with the "standard" school environment. I know that there are tremendous struggles within the education community about how best to assure the appropriate educational advancement of all children. I would argue that the much needed emphasis that "no child [be] left behind" (which I support and interpret as a way to assure adequate education for all children, regardless of socioeconomic circumstances) should be expanded to include new ways to accommodate different styles, paces, and ways of learning.

Of course, the ideal of educating each child as an individual is generally assumed to be much more expensive than standardized methods, and it is quite possible that standard educational methods may be appropriate and adequate for the majority of students. For children who for whatever reason are not yet ready or able to benefit from the standard learning environment, however, I would hope that new and creative ways of providing education and learning environments could be made available within, or with a small addition to, current budgets. I suspect that some economies may be realized with the adoption of computer and web applications, some of which could be optimized and individualized for the way students learn.

It seems likely that students from all backgrounds and abilities would benefit by addressing different styles and ways of learning, which would augment the idea of readiness for learning, one of Neill's central contributions. Addressing the individuality of learning style would be a useful addition to help assure that all children are advancing appropriately in their knowledge and understanding of the world.