DOSSIER

NEILL: FROM GRETNA GREEN CREED TO SUMMERHILL EXPERIENCE[27]

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Abstract: Assuming that the diaries reflect the thinking of teachers, it has been identified in A Domine Log dilemmas from which Alexander S. Neill built his pedagogic creed, in 1915. After demonstrating how this creed was consolidated, up to the establishment of Summerhill school in 1924, this paper is concluded by raising questions considering the need to study ways to take to the elementary public school systems innovations and practices based in Summerhill.

Keywords: Neill. Summerhill. Teacher's journals. Self-training.

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Introduction

A common finding in studies of the teaching profession is that teacher performance is influenced by the early years of education, considered from the earliest school experiences, to the academic education itself for the profession. These experiences have an impact on the professional identity often leading to the reproduction of ways of conceiving the act of teaching and build teaching. Findings about professional development disseminated mainly in the last decades of the twentieth century shows that, when placed in situations that require the reading and reflection on your way to work, professionals tend to revise their beliefs and evaluate its performance by making changes in their way of acting, adding new elements, principles and values to their practice. Under these influences, personal changes take place in different directions (Pineau, 1985; Kaddouri, 1996; Fond-Harmant, 1995).

Based on studies on the relationship between professional identity and education processes, Neill's story was investigated in a research, which, without privileging institutionalized education and not intending to proclaim the self-teaching, was organized around the assumption that subjects form themselves from the opportunities and limitations that life circumstances provide them, using formal and informal learning situations. The study had as main objective to identify how a group of teachers effectively exercising in elementary schools and three distinguished educators used self-training processes throughout their working life as part of a strategy to change and build yourself in a certain direction (Santana, 2006).

Analysis on Neill's story revealed a fragmented school education, childhood and youth school failure and early introduction into working.

At 14, due to the learning difficulties, becomes, by its family's decision, a teacher apprentice under his father's guidance, at the school where he had studied. Since then, at that and others schools for which he had been designated, performs its activities without involvement with teaching. As a

result, devalues the profession. Search movements of knowledge that he carries after his teacher's apprentice period, are not directly pointed to improve teaching practice, but aim to add his way of being competencies related to life in society - wants to learn to dance, to behave in social circles, to appreciate classical music and master the content required to take the exams, which, in his homeland, were requirements to advance in teacher's career. In 1908, when he decides to take a college course, moves away from teaching, a resolution that results from the way he was introduced in teacher activity and life experiences in his 10 years of career prior to his entry into university. The withdrawal in his career remained until his departure to Gretna Green in 1914, when he comes back to teach, against his will, due to war, which moves him away from journalism activities undertaken after graduate[29] . Only then he strives to build a way of being a teacher that culminates with the installation of Summerhill School in 1924[30] , at England.

The movements performed by Neill, between 1914 and 1924, to learn about teaching and education can be interpreted according to the view that the return to formal and informal studies in a self-directed search formation is an intention to restructure the underlying existence to which it is a logical disruption or identity conversion (Fond-Harmant, 1995). Experiencing a trajectory marked by conversion logic, individuals seek to reaffirm or perfect

[29] Gretna Green is a city in Scotland, country where Neill was born in 1883 and lived until 1912 when traveling to London as a journalist.

[30] The international school established in 1921 in Germany, with partners Otto Neustatter, and his wife, Frau Doktor, it is a precursor of Summerhill but does not correspond to the proposal Neill puts into practice later. Under the title *The origin of Summerhill*, Neill refers to the partners influence in the school organization and the limits that restrict their activities. When, in 1923, the revolution in Saxony breaks out, travels to the mountains of Tyrol, Austria, only with students of the division under his responsibility until 1924 ends, then leads these students to England and rents a house called Summerhill. It is then that the school is being built under the influence of his defended ideas (Neill, 1976, p.115-122).

identity traits, while in experienced trajectories according to a logic disruption occurs denial of previously assumed traits[31] .

In Neill's autobiography, as demonstrated by Santana (2007, p. 213-235), it is evident that he develops a perspective of searching knowledge and professional experiences of free choice, from 1914 until about 1924, when he goes to Summerhill. Occurs through this period a history of self-training, predominantly focused on building a progressive teacher profile. From this path emerges a pedagogic creed that is already fully outlined in the book *A Domine Log,* published in 1915, and which was consolidated through the various experiences lived by the year 1924.

From the experience lived in Gretna Green, determined to establish himself as a teacher, Neill has undertaken a biographical trajectory that is inscribed on a conversion logic through which sought to legitimize a position in a social space and professional already attended years ago. At that time in his life he did not undertake a break trajectory with the teaching profession previously assumed. Early on this path in 1915, when writing of *A Domine Log,* makes an explanation of values, principles and forms of action in the field of education. During the work, seeks to justify the assumed or explicit positions, signals the abandonment of practices learned and internalized under the influence of his father, who was his teacher and the trainer who initiated him in teaching. The reflection which occurs through this diary has continued at different times and biographical events experienced between 1914 and 1924 by which Neill had the opportunity to reaffirm and consolidate his positions and justifications. Over those 10 years, is legitimated as having a distinct professional profile in relation to the dominant among those considered traditional teachers.

[31] The main sources of study for Neill self-formation process were: the autobiographical book *Neill! Neill! Orange peel!*, published in 1976, the Spanish translation of *Neill, Neill, orange peel*, originally published in English in 1972; and the book *El nuevo Summerhill*, 1994, a compilation made by Albert Lamb of texts written by Neill.

That did not take place without conflicts, without recognizing that there were different ways of designing and making education and teaching, and to make choices between different paths. Similar situations experienced by Neill happens in different ways in the life of every teacher and are not always records of experienced change process for the teacher himself or others to access further.

In this article, on the premise that the diaries are a source to investigate teachers' thoughts, the book *A Domine Log,* written by Neill, was examined to identify the dilemmas from which he chose paths and decisions to build his pedagogical creed in 1915. Using others Neill's writings, it also holds a brief analysis to see how these paths and decisions were consolidated in self-training path followed by the installation of Summerhill in 1924. As a conclusion it raises some questions considering the need to bring, to elementary public schools, discoveries, innovations and principles which contribute to its administrative and educational functioning.

The book "A Domine Log": source to meet the construction process of Neill pedagogical creed

This is a book narrated in first person, with multiple references to the context of the small Gretna Green, portrayed as an isolated village without relations with the outside world.

Early in the English edition, in a dedication addressed to his father, Neill says how happy were the kids from the school that served as reference for writing the log, under his regency and direction. An evidence of how much he was still marked by the traumatic experiences of student and teacher apprentice in the school directed by his father and how many reflections on the practices experienced in the past were present in the book.

Among the reasons for the book's production it is necessary to consider what says Neill:

> I started writing this log to discover my philosophy of education, and I'm finding myself. Discover our self is the most important. Personality matters a lot in education. How far will I be a danger to my students? Will not I be influencing them too much? (Neill, 1976, p 282)[32].

Despite this statement, it is possible to conjecture about the existence of additional reasons not directly spelled out in the book, for example, when the author states that, fearing the possibility to limit their horizons to local habits of Gretna Green, decides to "write books do not go crazy "(Neill, 1976, p. 94) and at the same time, seeks to maintain contact with the world reading the New Age and the Nation newspapers, received weekly by mail. To these observations adds on the same page:

> Flit of Fleet Street [very busy London street and where were concentrated facilities of the major newspapers at the time] to a quiet village in Scotland required some adaptation. I was put in a small hut. When my landlady took the lamp at night and lowered the shutters of the small window I felt isolated from all over the world. It seems ridiculous that a man known as an education heretic has taken his profession just because he failed as a journalist and because he did not dare to enter the army.

It is clear that the writing also corresponded to the need to fill the nostalgic void that takes place when the author, used to a city life in London, is forced to live in a small town without the amenities and attractions, daytime and evening, of a big city.

In view of the circumstances surrounding the book and whereas one who writes always addresses an interlocutor, sometimes imaginary, raises questions like: To whom was Neill addressing? Himself? Other teachers? As a log produced step by step, in the course of his stay in Gretna Green as **a** teacher

[32] The version of the book A Domine Log used for writing this article is in Chapter V, page 264-337, of the book: NEILL, A.S. *Autobiografía. Neill! Neill! Orange peel*!, 1st. ed. in Spanish. Translation by Carlos Valdes Vazquez. Mexico / Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica 1976.

and director of a small school, it is correct **to** imagine that to write it, the author converses with himself. However, Neill had a career as editor of a college newspaper, and later played with satisfaction the role of journalist.

From his experience as an editor at the *The Student* and as *The Glasgow Herald* contributor, when he was 28 years, and an English Language Course student, Neill concluded: "Journalism was my future" (Neill, 1976, p 88.). Working field in which he seeks employment leaving university. Then goes to work in Scotland and later in London, editing an encyclopedia. Also writes the language, literature and mathematics sections and *Popular-Educator* reference book design. After that, still in London, works at *Picadilly Magazine,* whose publication scheduled for August 1914 was interrupted by the outbreak of war in July of that year.

On arrival at Gretna Green considered himself more a journalist than a teacher, hence the assumption that intended to give publicity to what he wrote, while already writing the log.

A Domine Log does not bring texts dated to identify how the narrated events took place in time, its structure indicates that the author did not use a driving plan in writing, various issues raised are addressed in a fragmented way, many of them taken in different sections. In view of Viñao (2004, p. 344), discontinuity and fragmentation in such texts are indications that the book was not subject to review after its original writing. That is, the book corresponds to the report prepared by Neill in the period he lived in Gretna Green and he says: " I write in a way similar to how I teach: going a topic to another without any order." (Neill, 1976, p. 331).

The fact is that the book in question is a personal document, a free production, made without the intervention of an investigator, someone who sought to direct or guide the author's reflection. One could say that it was the flow of daily events of his activity as a teacher and as a subject inserted into the social context of the small Gretna Green, reflections that fomented and led to

writing. The text, therefore, combines descriptions of how the teacher drove school activities, children's reactions to what was proposed to them, observed events in the community, references to the conduct of its inhabitants and the local characteristic human types, digressions on Neill's ideas, feelings and beliefs about education, teaching, society. Presents a descriptive component, recording details of classroom situations plus a significant and self-significant component to highlight features and reactions of students and character traits, skills, feelings, concerns and aspirations of the author himself[33] .

The students, the community and himself are the axes from which the author delimits positions and builds a creed, a very particular educational philosophy, which later was being tested and at the same time, consolidating itself in the exercise activities related to teaching and education, until taking the form of Summerhill school.

The log is a book intensely marked by Neill's life circumstances at the time that there was a retreat from the lifestyle experienced in previous years, when he lived in London, working as a journalist and with a busy social life. Contact with a way to be a teacher and a reflection on this way was facilitated by circumstances such as the bucolic aspect of Gretna Green, at that time; the state of war in which the world was; the return to the teaching situation after a long break; and the interim of the situation as a teacher and substitute principal. Moreover, the autonomy, due to the fact of being your own principal, the friendly relations established with those responsible for the inspection and the recognition that "to the School Staff it did not matter what he[...] done" (Neill, 1976 p. 95) resulted in freedom to try different teaching ways. The truth is that circumstances conspired to foster reflection on introduced innovations

[33] Zabalza (1994, p 110-111) distinguishes three types of diary to discuss the role of this instrument in the research of teacher's thoughts: diary as a structural class organizer in which the teacher specifies how he organized activities, using it as programming tool; diaries that describe the tasks performed with emphasis on dynamic teaching and diaries self-expressive that emphasize personal aspects to express the characteristics of the students and the teachers themselves.

and transgressions put in place with regard to the official standards and educational tradition.

Finally, the log is a testimony book of reflectivity moments lived by the author and its marked by his writing style and a distinctive type of humor that he cultivated.

Neill dilemmas in 1914, and the paths chosen

In *A Domine Log,* Neill records his dilemmas, dealing with "bipolar or multipolar situations that are presented to the teacher in the course of their professional activity" (Zabalza, 1994, p.61). Studies that analyze this aspect of the teaching profession believes that, when facing problematic situations that require decision-making, the teacher chooses to put himself in one of the poles which lies in the possibility of solving the problem.

The log presents problematic situations that require immediate decisions and shapes the deal with the daily life of the classroom, including questions relating to class control, the rules of student's behavior and the conduct of teaching certain content. It also presents the dialogues that the author had with himself and with other partners - fellow teachers and inspectors - about the most general terms that define a philosophy of education and refer to dilemmas related to problems and other broader questions, not directly related to the immediate classroom context. In this case, lays the reflections that give rise to questions about the inclusion or absence of certain subjects in the curriculum, teaching goals and education for children at the stage of elementary school in a country community, relations between social classes and the school's role clarifying the students about these relationships. Dilemmas that require immediate decisions, reflects in the teacher everyday action in the classroom. Others configures a philosophy, a way of thinking about teaching and education, when effectively internalized, can be reflected in the way of

planning activities, in the way to put yourself on the official proposals and how to lead the classroom activities.

The book holds different issues that affect the operation of a school. It recurs addressing issues relating to the control of discipline, including aspects related to students' autonomy, methods put in practice to regulate life in school and maintaining the necessary climate to ensure interaction between students, themselves and their teachers. In all the passages holding this issue, is noticeable the existence of the dilemma: imposed discipline versus self-discipline, in other words, imposed management centered on the teacher versus self-management. Dilemmas that teachers and school managers continue to face until now.

Early in the book (Neill, 1976, p. 268), there is a record of a physical punishment that the teacher carries to a student as penalty, adopting a coherent attitude with the norms and standards still in force at the time, but Neill, at the time of its history, considers reprehensible. The conducive conditions to a strange reaction to the practices that have always been present in his training as a teacher's apprentice and in his teaching career, were possibly created by his contact with new ideas in university and as an editor and writer at newspapers and magazines, through his period of absence of educational activities.

Amid the constant references to discipline, describes classroom incidents that give teachers the opportunity to apply punishments and to look into these attitudes to question the reasons for their actions and conjecture over children's reactions. Dilemmas regarding discipline gain visibility when the author confronts his way of being and conceiving a teacher-student relationship with the expectations of local community, parents and educational authorities regarding the requirement of strict discipline in school.

When talking about the inconvenience of the imposed discipline and strict obedience without understanding the reason for the proposed standards, highlights beliefs that will guide practice in the school of Gretna Green and in his future activities, as suggested by statements: "I believe in discipline but the

one that the individual imposes himself "(p 267.); "I do not like strict discipline because I believe that the child should have as much freedom as possible. I wish that children have to be human as I also have to "(p. 266).

From reflection on discipline comes experimentation procedures based on beliefs and self-management practices, that seem to consolidate over the writing period of the log. And at the root of self-management practices that he adopts is the belief in the need to inculcate in children a community spirit, in other words, "we must teach children that others also have rights [...] We all have the right to live our lives, but we must do it in harmony with the community" (p. 269).

Addressing the curriculum theme, Neill blends critics about the official imposition with positions on the importance of some curricula, considering especially the country characteristic of the school where he taught. The emergence of conflicts related to the acceptance versus rejection of the official guidelines on curriculum is visible. Throughout development of the entire book are present dilemmas about what to teach jointed dilemmas on teaching goals and education. I.e. along the log, Neill found himself in situations that forced him to reflect on why to teach or that evoked memories of these issues.

In Chapter I, a statement on the main objective to be achieved with his work already points to the positions taken on the role of content in school.

> I want my students to understand what it means life [...]. Yes, I want to teach them, or rather help them to find an attitude. Most of what I teach, they will forget in a year or two, but one attitude is preserved for life. I wish these guys and these girls acquire the habit of seeing life honorably (Neill, 1976, p. 265).

His thinking about what and how to teach becomes more clear when, on page 290, states: "I try to form minds that ask, destroy and rebuild." Proposes an incidental teaching, taking as a start point what happened occasionally in classroom, in the community and outside of Gretna Green using, for example, newspapers as a teaching resource. These are innovative initiatives at a time

when the norm was strictly follow the prescribed sequence content in educational programs, give lectures and use the textbook as the main or only recourse.

Reacts to the status granted to the observation in the teaching of natural sciences emphasizing that this teaching tool makes sense only if accompanied by imagination.

On the teaching of history, criticizes the textbooks based on stories of kings and queens who do not teach to think and passing a false impression of events and people. Therefore, "it is useless, what matters is the story of people and their gradual progress from slavery to heavy work" (p. 273).

Against the thought of the inspector who believes he is writing a practical science, Neill says that writing is "an art like drawing [...] Does the style matter? Art that sets the style is what makes writing good "(p. 275). Spelling and grammatical errors matter little. Proposed themes for redaction should stimulate the imagination, so that he usually starts a writing activity telling students: "Suppose you slept a thousand years, tell what happened after waking up" (p 297.). These points represent choices made around the dilemma: traditional teaching of writing and grammar versus a renewed education.

He describes the experiences that performs in the classroom when proposing free drawing and drives teaching in a coordinated manner with his personal experience in relation to this curriculum content (p. 275).

He declares himself against the presence of religion in the school curriculum and believes that sex education should be taught in school, so that students learn that sex is a normal fact of life (p. 286). He shows his sympathy for mixed classes where boys and girls learn the interdependence between genres and make many other observations about the curriculum, including those related to topics discussed in class: feminism, men relationship, worker exploitation, newspapers as ideologies disseminators, etc.

And at the end of the book (p. 336), reveals:

> Mary's father is right: my school turned into a playing field, and I'm glad of it. These boys have enjoyed a year of happiness and freedom. They did what they wanted; sang while working in his writings, ate candy while reading his books, threw themselves in my arms when wandering in search of beautiful landscapes.

The results were not only freedom and child's joy. The log reveals an experimentation of ways to teach certain content regarding interests and characteristics of children, and the need that every teacher feels to coordinate what and how he teaches with his way of being and seeing the world. With the completion of activities outside the classroom, there was an expansion of the concept of learning spaces, clearly when Neill says:

> My students remain in the field all day. The class takes his books, goes and rests in the hills. When I want them to come, I call them with the bugle. Each group has a curfew and quickly returns when hearing it (p. 301).

While the older students were in the field, the teacher taught to children who were not allowed to go alone to that space. Outdoor drawing activities were also held on certain days of the week. The test of self-management practices is evident in the statement:

> I do not force any child to learn in my school. The few who do not like books and classes can leave their seats when I'm teaching. Those who flee at the duty are not always the most ignorant (p. 301).

There were also tested new forms of relationship between teacher and student in an attempt to pass to the child the image of a human teacher, who has feelings and tastes, enjoy pleasure, cultivate forms of leisure and distances himself of the authoritarian teacher figure, one that is too far from the child.

On the last page of the log, an evaluation of his time as a teacher in Gretna Green:

> I'll be honest to a certain point and finish my log solemnly declaring I believe I have done a fine job. As for the work expected of me by the Department of Education in Scotland ... Well, my last entry in the official diary is a good sample: The school closed today because summer holidays began. I received my discharge from the Department (Neill, 1976, p. 337).

Consolidation of the creed: from the experiences on the early 20s to Summerhill in 1924

After Gretna Green and a brief time as military in World War I, Neill works at private institutions, in tune with the renewal of teaching proposals. He meets Homer Lane and his community of young offenders which he directed adopting principles of self-management. He was hired to work at King Alfred School by John Russell, a progressive educator, and there performs a self-management experience that was unsuccessful. Undergoing analysis sessions with Homer Lane, he was enchanted by the analyst because "what he told me about freedom was the gospel that I was seeking, was the scientific basis of vague yearnings that had shown in my A Domine Log "(p. 108).

At this time, Neill conceives the analysis as an important resource for children education and begins to formulate his assumptions about the need to consider sexual impulses in children's education.

Later around 1921, along with Beatrice Ensor, he becomes an editor of the journal *Education for The New Era*, the English edition of the World New Education journal own by the New Education Fellowship created by Beatrice and Ferrière. In the French edition called Pour L'Ere Nouvelle, it was constant the presence of articles on Progressive School, self-management, co - education, active school, Decroly, Montessori, Ferrière and others. The first issue of the journal in 1922 records that was proposed by the New Education Fellowship, an education for development of spirit supremacy making The child aware of human dignity. The fellowship defended as principles: respect for children individuality, their innate interests, freely expressed through manual, intellectual, aesthetic, social activities and others;

personal and collective discipline organized by children themselves in order to strengthen the sense of individual and social responsibility; replacing competition for cooperation, teaching the children to put their subjectivity working in community; coeducation learned as instruction and common education with collaboration between the two genres in order to exercise salutary influence on each other[34].

Due to the relationship with Beatrice Ensor, an important member of the Theosophical Society and the England educational environment, Neill participates at Calais in the first International Congress of New Education, organized by Ferrière; speaks at a conference in Salzburg, Austria; goes to Germany where he creates with other partners in Hellerau an international school that remains working in the country from 1921 until 1923, when the revolution in Saxony breaks out and he departs taking his students, first to Austria and then to Summerhill in England.

The period of 1918 until early 20s, accounted for Neill an expansion of horizons that certainly contributed to consolidation of the creed built in Gretna Green. Consolidation that occurred, either by incorporating new elements such as the concept of freedom inspired by Homer Lane, either by a fierce adherence to previously built principles, fueled by battles fought to fend off less extremist ideas than his on renewal of education. Although in Gretna Green's creed there were already glimpses of principles defended by the New Education Fellowship, some of these principles appear more clearly and with more striking emphasis later in the descriptions of Neill on the education proposal practiced at Summerhill.

[34] Principles taken from the number 1 *POUR L 'ERE NOUVELLE,* French edition of the World New Education Fellowship journal, edited by Ferrière and published in January 1922, available at http://www.unicaen.fr/recherche/mrsh / pen . Access 22 dez.2015. The various numbers of *The New Era,* English edition of the Fellowship journal edited by Neill along with Beatrice Ensor, are at the Institute of Education, University of London and are not available for electronic consultation.

The fact is that ideas concretely practiced and defended in Summerhill are consistent with the creed formulated in 1915, and remain so until the twenty-first century.

What questions should be asked on Summerhill in the XXI century?

Former students, visitors and Neill reports, describe Summerhill as a school that runs as an internship and coeducation school, located in large playgrounds favorable to recreation, where autonomy was encouraged in order for the students to be themselves and evolve according to their interests. In this school they were free to choose subjects to study and handcrafts they want to experience; classes are not mandatory, each child decide when to attend them; formation of character and personality matter more than learning content. The school has a proposal for self-management to be effective through a weekly meeting held on Saturdays, which involved teachers, principals, staff and students of all ages. Through this mechanism it takes place the construction of standards to rule school community and judgment of infractions while each member's vote has equal weight, since all have equal rights[35].

There are many questions that a greater knowledge of Summerhill experience raises, especially when associating its birth with its creator's history of life and formation.

The first questions raised here relate to the experience permanence. With so many educational innovations, public and private, which were short-lived or had lost identity, how to explain that Summerhill proposition remained to this day with the same characteristics? What factors contributed to the continuity of experience and fidelity to the original proposal?

Summerhill is a private school that has always worked for a small number of students. In 1949 there were only seventy students between 4 and 16 years; in 2007 it worked with 78 students between 5 and 17 years. It is broad knowledge

[35] See text by Zoe Readhead, Neill's daughter, titled *Summerhill today,* in Vaughan (2011).

the difficulty of replicating Neill experience in major primary and secondary public schools currently in our country. Despite the impossibility of full reproduction, innovations and discoveries that occurred there may in some way contribute to enlighten dilemmas that still persist in the administrative and pedagogical management of public schools. Therefore, raises the question: what reinterpretation of Summerhill experience is necessary for discovering principles, criteria, strategies and practices applicable to public education? This is not to seek a transplant; the key is to find inspiration to transform or adapt practices.

Neill always refused to seek theoretical explanations for the principles and practices adopted in Summerhill, his writings on the experience reported characteristics of the work at school, justifying them in a very personal way. In addition to the restrictions outlined in the official inspection reports carried out at school, critics like Saffange (1995) point out weaknesses and believe that the principles on which the school was built and ran and its results lack analysis and solid justification. These considerations lead to the question in what principles of educational theories developed in recent decades, Summerhill could be considered? And who will do this?

The testimony of Zoe Readhead, school's current principal, point out that, in recent years, it has been through some changes and adjustments to reality. Nothing yet that matches a systematization involving the whole proposal, removing itself from the status of an intuitive conception to be put as an educational proposal, whose original principles resonate totally or partially on theoretical assumptions currently present in the field of education and related areas. Without this "Summerhill was and will remain for a long time a mythical place where once was born a world of love and harmony" (Saffange 1999, p.10).

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