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SUMMERHILL, OR A. S. NEILL´S LEGACY FOR THE LIBERATING WELL-MADE HEAD EDUCATION

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Submission: 06/06/2015 Review: 04/09/2015 Acceptance: 29/09/2016

Abstract: This text is a free essay that aims to share the main concepts of the work of Alexander Neill, founder of the free school called Summerhill. It can be considered a transdisciplinary product that seeks to combine the ideals of Neill's free education with the ideas against the "banking education" of Paulo Freire and the postulates of the well-made head from the method for complexity of Edgar Morin. Throughout the essay we recalled autobiographical school experiences to exemplify and defend the need for different forms of education, such as Summerhill. It was written to provoke reflection on the current state of school education, but mostly to feed future research in favor of educational processes themselves.

Keywords: Complexity. School education. Summerhill. Freedom.

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> There is a chap here called Neill, I like him (Summerhill student, quoted by Readhead, 2011, p. 128).

This paper describes a work that is incomplete. The truth is, when I look to the Brazilian educational system, I tend to believe this work hasn't even begun... I have studied to be a pedagogue. As a professional I became a college professor assigned to teach educational courses to future school teachers. So, either as a student or as an educator, school has always been part of my daily life. I have tried other things – such as working with training and recruitment for human resources in big transnational companies, or seeking support in Chinese medicine and even in metaphysics –, but classrooms and the academy hallways do fascinate me in a way which I cannot be apart ... Although the tone of this first paragraph indicates a strong emotional bond to the school environment, there are aversive elements in its *modus operandi*, which I have been reflecting upon and even struggling against[2].

So this essay is somewhat autobiographical. I resume this intimate connection between my own memoirs and the school environment in order to explain these aversive elements which, simultaneously, push me away and drag me into pursuing a daily school different from what is laid out: a school with crowded classrooms, clogged syllabus, exam-driven, with no freedom to frolic, play or learn... a school that for centuries maintains the same solid foundation: a place for rational learning and discipline, which means silent, obedient and "say please and thank you" children, just like robots. This describes a school that often cannot effectively educate and therefore does not fulfill its primary purpose. And as I set myself in the search of a new form of school, I found support in the theoretical premises of A. S. Neill, especially when I read his idea about the classical or traditional education, which tend to introduce the classes syllabus "by force" in the students. For Neill (1978, p. 33), "this is not

[2] Fortunato, 2011, 2010, 2009; Fortunato & Catunda, 2011; 2010.

education[3]". This controversial British educator was responsible for creating the free school Summerhill, whose existence, in the Suffolk county, England, dates from the 1920s. Having **freedom**, **self-governing** and **happiness** as guiding principles, its students choose their activities according to their desires and/or skills: in Summerhill, nothing is introduced "by force".

To write this essay, I repeat, I was motivated by my very own schooling. Nevertheless, for the most pragmatic thinkers, personal accounts of isolated facts do not make science. I disagree. Just like Marcos Reigota (2008, p. 12), I believe in the concept of bio:graphy, which means the possibility of "narrating our presence in the world (graphy) and our existential, professional and political (bio) relationships[4]" and, from this standpoint, it becomes possible to identify and recognize ourselves as people who make history and do not only live according to what is given. So, to go back to our own school life in order to report it and reflect upon it, it is not only interesting, but it is potentially challenging.

It is interesting because it provides a broader and more complex understanding of situations fixed in memory, which allows such situations to be revisited from a new look at the past, allowing us to envision new aspects to the present pedagogical work. With this, to think about the bio:graphy, or self:bio:graphy, may be a feasible way to articulate the necessary reflection on the teaching practice, making it more fertile.

The challenge of this expedition to the past is precisely to identify, in the historicity of schooling processes, elements that constitute obstacles to educate, regarding its purpose of citizenship development. We saw some of these barriers, broadly described in the blunt criticism by Edgar Morin (2004) to the contemporary school model (which is practically an ancient model), especially by emphasizing that school education has been based on a logic guided by a

[3] All Neill's quotes were adapted from the Portuguese version of his writings.
[4] All Reigota's quotes were adapted from the Portuguese version of his writings.

kind of imperative information storage, by teachers who accumulate, and by students who must accumulate. Morin (2004) has found, in Montaigne writings, ballasts to explain this incongruity: the school intends to produce well-filled heads, instead of well-made heads, which show up in the "general ability to place and address problems[5]" (p. 21), making them well suited "to organize the knowledge and thereby avoid a sterile accumulation" (p. 24). The author therefore expressed the imperative and urgent need to rethink to reform education from that principle of well-made heads.

These criticisms, in a way, are very close to those contained in the concept of "banking education" presented by Paulo Freire (1983, p. 166), in which the school considers the teacher the one and only knowledge-keeper, therefore, the one who must make daily "deposits of contents that must be filed by students[6]". From time to time, at the end school terms, the teacher must "check", through evaluative evidence, if the deposits made were correctly filed by the students. In banking education there is a sense of success, both for teachers and students, which are measured by the amount of deposits made and filed ... or, well-filled heads.

If the thesis of Morin and Paulo Freire explain a necessary change for school education as a whole, it is by examining the bio:graphical, or autp:bio:graphical, everyday that particularities are revealed and can become object for analyses. This is because the school everyday studies[7] reveal the flow, plurality and multiplicity of **each school**, **each classroom**, **each otherness relationship** constituted in the schooling places which cannot be simplified by legal acts and scientific axioms that pretend to determine a **unique** education.

So when I think about my own journey over the years of schooling, I identify many disagreements between the everyday idiosyncrasies and the legal

[5] All Morin's quotes were adapted from the Portuguese version of his writings.
[6] All Paulo Freire's quotes were adapted from the Portuguese version of his writings.
[7] According to the research group "Cotidiano Escolar", and its research line "Meio Ambiente, Cultura e Cotidiano Escolar" from the University of Sorocaba, supervised by Dr. Marcos Reigota.

and/or scientific excuses that claim to know by far the truth about learners and educators.

Here is an example derived from math classes: all children up to the age of ten need to know (by heart) the zero to nine multiplication tables. At that age when I was in school, I attended a "recreational" activity (between quotes), designed to "stimulate" the students in the fourth grade to "learn" the multiplication table: it was the bingo game (I will eventually come back to these terms in quotes). In that game, which intended to "engrave" in our minds the content of multiplications, each student received a piece of paper with several numbers representing the result of a multiplication (16, for instance) while the teacher would randomly *call out* several multiplications, such as 8 times 2. The students should pay careful attention to the *callings* because if the multiplication result was written in our chart, this would be circulated. The first student to fill the chart would "earn" points to be added to the final grade. What I have experienced in this activity was: (i.) from the standpoint of the researcher I became 20 years later standpoint: curiosity; (ii.) from the perspective of the ten-year-old student: bitterness. In a nutshell, the situation was: I used to like math and to learn fast; so, after winning three times the bingo game, I was just forbidden to participate in the following matches. The child (that I was) could not understand why the teacher did that; the (want to be) researcher that I am, cannot understand either.

Alexander Neill opposed this kind of directive, frustrating, castrating education... yet, that is the kind of schooling that has been conducted in schools for centuries. Hence his efforts were directed to a more permissive engaging, motivating education... bringing out the free school of Summerhill. In addition to the free school, the legacy of Neill has been immortalized in several books (1984; 1978; 1976; 1972), in which he expressed that his greatest inspiration was the Little Commonwealth school, created by Homer Lane to house young law-offenders. At that school there was no arbitrary and authoritarian order, but

only genuine respect in the relations of otherness, which is not respect veiled by words such as please, thank you, yes sir… Neill also was influenced by psychoanalysis of Freud and his ideas about transference and countertransference, but he was also touched by the psychoanalytic theory of Ian Suttie, in which the author argues that love is the main element of socialization and development of harmonious relations of otherness.

Through Summerhill, Neill was able to solidify his theory and turn his studies into practice, establishing a school where students are free to choose whether and when to play, to attend regular classes, stay in the garden, in the workshop, sleeping.... In Summerhill, there are no concepts of education in quotes (returning, as promised earlier), such as "recreational, stimulating, rewarding...". For the founder of Summerhill, to learn while playing, or playing to learn, it would be a delusion, since the use of recreational resources to mask a false learning would be dangerous for children. The danger, according to thorough analysis of children's psyche made by Neill, is the formation of an individual that is not **self-governing** – a concept that expresses the idea of an individual who lives in freedom, of body, mind and soul.

Not only that, Neill also believed that it would not be possible to stimulate a student to learn something that does not interest her/him. However, from reading his books, it is observed that Neill used to *encourage* students to pursue their desires – a road to **happiness**, understood as a fully fulfilled life, which is independent of any achievement or financial status or power or fame.

We must also consider that, in Summerhill, there is strong criticism of the notion of learning that, between quotes, is equivalent to memorizing meaningless content, which is, to repeat the filed content. Neill did not use the term *file content*, but certainly his attitude towards this very common school conduct would be disgust. That is why he disapproved of all this school falsehood to impose things to the students: copy, repeat, memorize, silent, sit ... Neill would say that none of this educates. Later, these ideas would find echo

in the reformed education for well-made heads conceived by Morin (2004, p. 22), which "should encourage the natural aptitude of the mind to pose and solve the problems". And the problems that students of non-free schools (that is, the conventional school) have to solve are problems created by and for education itself: vicious circles of copy, listen, store, archive and repeat.

In Summerhill, not only the students are freed from repressive ideal of banking education or well-filled heads, because the notion of teacher as a content depositor disappears. For Neill (1978, p. 151), "a teacher is not an encyclopedia of facts; he is a researcher". It is for the experience of learning, respect and the love for studying and students, that someone becomes a teacher at the free school. To be a free teacher, one must be willing to share knowledge and life experience, not only in speech but in action. By dealing with the complexity of and for education, the teaching concept for Morin approaches Neill's. We saw such an approach when Morin, Ciurana and Mota (2003, p. 98), noted that being a teacher cannot be reduced to a mere function, specialization or profession, for being a teacher is a "political task in itself, a mission of sharing life strategies". Therefore, teaching should not be considered only a profession of lesson taking, focused on accumulation of content in well-filled heads, but rather an ethical and political activity for the formation of citizenship.

When considering the thought expressed by Neill and his initiative to free school, we found a possibility of educational work that enhances well-made heads and, most importantly, happy citizens. His courage is admirable: Neill (1978) described how he was forced to leave his job as a schoolmaster that he held in a small village in the UK, because he refused to hit the students who did not know the subject taught, he did not hold the small ones in their chairs, and did not make them memorize poems. In the small village, Neill let the children discover their own best, allowing them to explore the world, helping them to get to know more and better their own existence. However, he did not give lessons of history and geography; not how the orthodox academics of the time

wanted them to be (which is the same contemporary orthodoxy under different label), based on pure memorization of dates, events, geographical features and the names of capitals. Interesting passages of his book, which narrate events subsequent to his discharge from the schoolmaster's office by the education authority, show how little Neill cared about the contents to be archived, but cared about children, about the happiness of children, expressed in moments of joy, learning and enchantment with the learning:

> - I did not teach you enough. How many of you know which is the capital of Bolivia? You see, nobody knows.
> - Please sir, what is it? - Asked Jim Jackson.
> - I don't know it either, Jim ... (Neill, 1978, p. 25).

> I see now that I never had the slightest chance against the enemy. They could point out what they called failures ... Johnnie did not know history, Lizzie drew too much, Peter was not very respectful. I could point nothing. I abolished fear, made the school a place of joy, encouraged the natural inclination of each child… (Neill, 1978, p. 50).

The natural inclination of each child... this sentence carries one of the most important concepts of education for Neill, which is freedom. To understand what, how and why Neill believed in the free education, one must know that the author believed that humankind is naturally good, and it is the oppression of one's desires and subjectivity in the early childhood that culminates in the production of individuals motivated by regression to the initial stages of life. However, freedom is not license. According to the thought of Neill, there is huge difference between: (i.) the education that allows and enables the child's development and the realization of their abilities and desires - that is freedom - ; and (ii.) the education that does not impose any limit, and allows the child to realize all their desires, even if it means the transgression of desires(s) of other(s) - which is the license. For Neill (1972, p. 54), wars, brutality, thefts and robberies, the derision, the grotesque... are all expressions of men and women who, hostages of an oppressive system formed by church, school and (false)

morality, could not be free. Hence his optimistic ideal that human nature is so good, that the main purpose of education should be to eliminate all that can transform the original goodness to evil.

With this standpoint, Neill never said that he was the leader of his school. He believed that the imposition of laws and rules of conduct would only reinforce feelings of hostility towards authority figures that exerted pressures and repressions on the children's wishes. For Neill, the purpose of the school was to enable each individual to develop his/her self-government. Therefore, Summerhill has never been managed by a single man or woman, but for all students and teachers, and the decisions regarding collective life have been taken together in the weekly assembly – including decisions about punishments for members of the community for theft and trespasses –, demonstrating how it is possible, in fact, to put into practice the concepts of cooperation and democracy, which have long circulated in the scholars and political speeches.

Of course, these ideals were (and still are) subject to criticism from academia and society. One of the main arguments against Summerhill is the issue of learning/memorizing the curriculum content and its consequent need for colleges and job applications. Neill would say that a student would pass the examinations if he/she devoted time to prepare him/herself, and that the student should only engage in this task if he/she wished so. We repeat: the pursuit of happiness was the primary motivator for the educational work done by Neill.

At the end, I go back to the same idea used at the beginning of this essay: I wrap it up with concluding it. The work of Neill is very extensive and his views on education, school, individual and society are very dense and deep, making it impossible to be covered in a single assay. Here, the intent was to present its basic postulates, bringing them closer to the liberation education of Paulo Freire and the complex thought of Edgar Morin. Because if Neill was passed over by the academic studies on education, the complex thinking and criticism of the

banking education are alive, and they have been dominating many concerns and researches aimed at improving education. And I also wish that education would improve.

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