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BIG KIDS: THEIR MEANING, DEVELOPMENT AND IMPORTANCE IN SUMMERHILL SCHOOL

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Abstract: This article will be considering a particular societal aspect of A. S. Neill's Summerhill School namely 'Big Kids'. The effect of the Big Kid role on the social structure of the school means that children in Summerhill are not in the care of adults but actually in the care of other children.

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Introduction

Summerhill itself has been running continuously in England since 1921 and operates with two major (defining) features: Firstly, attendance at lessons is not compulsory and secondly the entire school community is part of a one-person one-vote democracy – managed through a whole group meeting process. On many levels Summerhill appears much like a conventional boarding school; it takes pupils who range in age from 5 to 16, it has a director, teachers and pastoral carers (called House-parents) and offers the usual spread of subjects taught through timetabled lessons - further there are activities that could be construed as 'extra-curricular' such as sports, music etc.

Essentially, Summerhill can be described as a community of peers operating with a strong notion of social equality - reflected and reinforced by the institution of the Meeting. Yet in spite of this equality a paradox emerges in that there is a hierarchy - represented in the form of community 'elders', as described by Bohannan (1958), however these elders are not the adults but are in fact (in the most part) the older children - referred to as 'Big Kids'. In their role as Big Kids the child is seen as a custodian of the school's culture.

Through my PhD (1992) studies I identified Big Kids as cultural artefact of Summerhill and this article is an exploration of their development, roles and meanings. Whilst the data cited were collected some time ago (through the 1980s) from my previous[19] and on-going relationship with the school, I believe that the phenomenon I describe continues to be very much part of the life of the school.

The data for this work were collected as a series of one to one interviews with current and past pupils and also current and past staff. The interviews essentially took a grounded theory approach which also used topics generated by my previous experiences of the school - to serve as openings rather than

[19] My mother attended the school from 1937. I attended 1962/1972. My children attended between 1990/2004

guidance. The interviews were mainly conducted by myself and all were tape recorded and transcribed. The transcribed data were explored using a process of thematic analysis.

Background

In general terms Big Kids are often the oldest children or 'carriage kids[20]' although this is not necessarily a prerequisite, nor guarantee, of 'Big Kidness'. This paper is an exploration of this phenomenon and questions I pursued covered areas such as; who are identified as a Big Kids? What attributes does Big Kidness encompass? Is there a clear demarcation zone? How is Big Kidness experienced? What is it used for? What values does it represent? How is it replicated? What does the notion mean to the rest of the community and how does that status relate to the staffs' role at Summerhill? Indeed, why are there Big Kids in Summerhill?

Findings:

Time served

One of the most obvious and most simply explained reasons is that in most cases 'Big Kid' is a description of a child who has been in the school for many years and who has grown up through the system. In some cases, this could have been over a period of 9 or 10 years. Very few of the staff spend that length of time working in the school. The effect of this is noted by a pupil:

> Big Kids have often been at Summerhill a lot longer than the staff, so in some ways you can say that they are more professional Summerhillians (Carriage kid).

[20] The children are divided by age in terms of their dormitories and each of these has a name derived generally from the building or area in which they are placed. The sequence runs from youngest to oldest in this order: San, Cottage, Corner Room, House, Shack, Stables, and Carriages.

The comment demonstrates the children themselves hold the understanding that Big Kids are the 'experts' and, as shown below, can be critical of the staffs' lack of 'expertise':

> Sometimes I think they (the staff) are really stupid for doing something they have no experience of - a kind of thing that I do have experience of (Carriage Kid).

A statement revealing that the children viewed their role as equal to the staff. Reinforcing this idea, members of staff indeed described themselves as being less skilled in some aspects of working in the school than the children.

> Quite often I will ask the kids what they think, particularly in the case of disrupted lessons… I think the kids' advice on day to day affairs is very valuable ... you can get a much better understanding of what the kid is about by going and asking the other children (Teacher).

Progression

My research showed that there was an understanding that Big Kidness was part of a progression or process of maturation, with the interviews revealing that Big Kidness was seen as a final stage involving a transition from little kid to Big Kid.

> It's so weird remembering when I was in the corner room. (10-11 years old) I was such a different person to how I am now… I'm a carriage kid - somebody responsible (Carriage Kid).

> You worked toward being a Big Kid (Carriage kid).

The interviews revealed Big Kidness through a variety of descriptors for example; responsible, active, respected and grown up, all combining to give an overview of the Big Kid as a mature and active participant in the community. This was also picked up through the converse descriptions of those who had not quite attained Big Kid status. Phrases such as: 'wound up in themselves'

and 'selfish' were used. Big Kidness was also identified by the active nature of individuals' involvement in the community - where selfishness would be considered inappropriate – and the view that selfish or self-centredness would be a characteristic of younger children. The data showed process of change from little kid to Big Kid via a seemingly asocial state to a social one.

> I think when you are small you don't really think about it – there's nothing to think back on - you just live your life (Carriage kid).

This remark from a Big Kid about his erstwhile 'small' status reinforces that Big Kidness might be considered as the end of a process. The evidence also indicated that it would be difficult to behave as a Big Kid without experience gained from life in Summerhill.

> You do understand things differently when you are older. You look at things in a different way. In the cottage you might think of such-and-such a law as being one thing, by the time you get up through the corner room to the next stage you are looking at it from a different point of view (Carriage kid).

It also appeared that becoming a Big Kid was considered the more demanding option.

> If you are bigger you've got more experience, you think about things more, analyse things more in detail. So the older you get the harder it is (Carriage kid).

The data showed that the experience gained through living in the community becomes grist to an increasingly analytical mill: 'You think about things more - analyse things in more detail.' Through this Big Kidness seems to invoke a moral imperative of 'thinking about'. However, it must also be noted that was not a matter of social pressure, as no one is obliged to don the mantle of Big Kid, but that without such introspection the status of Big Kid was unlikely to be attained.

Respect

Big Kidness also involves a notion of earned respect. The Big Kid is most often seen as having sound, unbiased judgement, coupled with some degree of diplomacy or tact and thereby most often able to make suggestions acceptable to all parties. This I see as a reinforcement of the notion of community 'Elder' and the idea that Summerhill society has similarities to some form of tribal system[21].

On the interpersonal level the Big Kid is seen as a sympathetic person who operates with the knowledge and expertise gained through their years in the school. I speculate that the central aspect of the art of Big Kidness is connected to the Big Kid having acquired the skill of being able to put him or herself in the position of others. Mead (1934)[22] describes this as sympathy, whereas nowadays we would more likely characterise it as empathy.

Learning to be a Big Kid

It appeared that Big Kidness is learnt through being engaged and displayed through the application of experiences to various situations both on a personal and public level – potentially then an experiential model – but, as the data also showed, Big Kidness was replicated using a model of apprenticeship.

> … you show the little ones how you sort of, I don't know how you'd say, how you can explain it, well sort of you show them how it is to be a Big Kid (Carriage kid).

> They [the Big Kids] have lots of experience and they sort of pass their experience on to the younger kids (Shack kid).

[21] Winter, (1958) p145 "Two men who have a dispute merely seek out an elder who listens to the argument and judges between them".
[22]Mead (1934) 'Sympathy comes, in the human form, in the arousing in one's self of the attitude of the individual whom one is assisting, the taking the attitude of the other when one is assisting the other'.

A further feature of life in Summerhill is the active nature of the individual's participation in the meanings and understandings of the culture. Children in Summerhill are continually making statements as to how people are 'measuring up' – generally based on their beliefs as to how the other's role should be enacted.

> The people who left last summer were really good, they kept the whole school together. They had good proposals in the Meeting, they knew what they were talking about really - they were good.

A statement in the converse:

> Last term the big kids weren't really interested in the little kids.

Big Kidness is clearly recognised as a role by the community, illustrated in the statements above to involve the individual being less interested in self. The overall process is seen as part of a continuum of maturity whereby the individual gradually takes a more outwardly social stance in the community. This seen by the pupils as a more or less inevitable progress rather than as an ideological one and coming about (inevitably) through being part of the school for many years.

Pupils and Big Kids

Considering factors involved in motivating a child to want to become a Big Kid, the notion of peer group identification would appear to have currency. Indeed Big Kidness could be seen as the ultimate accolade and statement of approval from the peer group. It is worth noting however that most schools are stratified into year groups where children spending most of their time with others of the same age thereby curtailing interactive possibilities. In Summerhill through the unrestricted social contact the child is able to develop relationships across all age ranges. As any Big Kid is in contact with everyone in the

community the peer group must be seen as expanding to the whole group i.e. including staff.

Another point to note is that through the unrestricted social contacts as described above, a form of family grouping emerges. However, instead of remaining just an enlarged version of the family Summerhill appears to add another dimension (as also noted within other free schools), Swidler (1979) provides an account from her work:

> Free schools are much more egalitarian than families. They are somewhat like a large group of siblings, a society of peers, without parents or children. The teachers' statuses are equalised to counter balance the teachers' traditional advantages of age, experience and position in the organisation. In its atmosphere of intimacy and affection, its reliance on motives of love and guilt to bind people to the community, the free school mimics family life. But it explicitly challenges that combination of love and domination that characterises traditional family life in our society and carries over into the usual relationships of teachers and students in school (p. 145).

The Summerhillian perspective:

> … better than a family because you haven't got this very close relationship with people of power over you, there is much more negotiation available because the community is much bigger (ex Summerhillian).

The interesting aspect of the normative order of 'free schools' (as described above) and mirrored in Summerhill is that it creates social rather than hedonistic one, requiring students to learn autonomy and group participation in place of individualism and achievement.

Staff, Big Kidness and power relationships

Following from the points raised above - who do Summerhill pupils consider have power over them? An idea taken up by this fourteen year old were he describes the position of the staff:

> R. How do the staff figure, are they very important or not so important, or what?
>
> No, I don't think they are as important really, well I guess that's compared to a normal school, I guess they are just sort of level [with the Big Kids] really.

It appears that this transfer of power from the usual automatically ascribed hierarchy to one that is manifest through social conferment makes a significant contribution to the differences seen in the pupil/staff dynamics in Summerhill. Teachers and other members of staff are not automatically treated deferentially – indeed like the rest of the community they have to earn such respect.

The structures of control and power in Summerhill are at odds with most western traditional school-based educational processes, where we expect to see teachers as the power group (in proxy for the state). In Summerhill much of the power is in the hands of the children and embodied through the Big Kid role. What is important here is that the members of the community have in effect granted that power to the Big Kid role and it this is what gives primary weight to their position. By conferring upon an individual an expectation of what a Big Kid should and should not do, the role's actual power is maintained by the community; for if a Big Kid does not 'measure up' they lose their Big Kid status. In other power models we generally see a community obligated to measure up to the power owner's view of what is acceptable. So power in the Summerhill Big Kid appears not to be a power over in a coercive sense but power from being trusted and believed in i.e. conferred power.

> … People would listen to what I had to say. If they were having a big row and I came along they would stop rowing long enough to tell me what was happening and they would generally do what I suggested. I enjoy the kudos of that, to put it bluntly. I think others get the same kick out of it as me, that people respect them (Carriage Kid).

This again reinforces the link between Big Kidness and social approval. In each instance, the power is conditional on a 'good' performance of the role by the Big Kid. This notion of 'good' performance raises an interesting proposition: Could Big Kidness be gained and then lost? It seems unlikely, in terms of the length of time that the Big Kid status needs to grow and I did not find an instance of it. However, I also found no data refuting it and therefore the question or proposition must remain unanswered. Nonetheless Big Kid as a person of status and conferred power is an interesting shift and stands in contrast to the usual school setting, as described earlier where the people with the power are staff.

Issues for Big Kidness

So far this paper has shown that Big Kidness is in part the outcome of living in Summerhill and having been allowed the freedom to develop as an individual. Neill would contend this to be result of a natural process and sociology would suggest it to be part of the process of socialisation. A question that emerges is: To what extent is it freedom of choice or a manifestations of increasingly sophisticated compliance? By this I mean is the idea of individual freedoms so overlaid by the stated and unstated imperatives within this culture that there is actually only one pathway?

> The difficulty about being a Big Kid is that you are no longer untainted, that is the awful thing. We know that things affect you from when you are born… it's because you have only been here for five years, you are comparatively untouched in a way. But when you are fifteen, pressures, there are a lot of pressures even in Summerhill, you know – 'you Big Kids have got to start being responsible now - it is time you started. (ex Summerhillian).

In further exploration of motivation coming from outside pressure the respondent continued:

> …that when you are a teenager you are at this horrible transition stage where you really don't have that much conviction, you really don't have much courage. Not many teenagers will turn around to someone and say 'I believe this, I am right, don't argue with me.' I think that is probably why, because you are just very easily influenced by other people, because you are not really sure what you think. I can remember as a teenager not really being sure what I thought. I think you worry much more, so therefore you are much more prone to pressures from above, from grown-ups. Kids should be allowed to think what is best for them. They shouldn't feel obliged to do something like that [look out for the younger ones] I think that is outside pressure. When you are a Big Kid you are much closer to staff pressure. They [the kids] would eventually talk themselves around if they were here long enough (ex Summerhillian).

Interestingly the last sentence is showing a reversal of the ideas expressed in the earlier part of the statement; we have been told that the Big Kids are probably influenced by the staff, then we are told that left to their own devices, they (the Big Kids) would 'talk themselves around'. What are we to conclude from this? It could be simply a matter of perspective in that the adult is perhaps seeing a wider view of the situation. Alternatively it could be that this adult had never reached the status of Big Kidness, as witnessed by the line 'you don't have much conviction … not many teenagers will turn around and say, I believe this, I am right… ' Where previous explorations in this paper showed that Big Kidness implied that the Big Kid would have the courage to say such things and indeed the data shows that they make reference to their relationship with the staff in terms of their own 'expertise' and not that of the adults. However, there is an apparent paradox. If we look at the following statement we can see an interesting feature in the relationship between the role of the staff and the role of the Big Kid.

> The staff if necessary have to be your fall guy, they are your heads of the tribe, if you like, because I think you have got to have something there, something that you really trust and care for to go and argue your conscience (to). I don't think that Big Kids should consider themselves the last in the chain, the staff's role is vital as being the end of the chain, completing the picture - to be there. The kids don't want to be complete staff, complete grown-ups (ex Summerhillian).

It was clear from the data that staff do not have the same status nor necessarily the same types of power as Big Kids. But, as described by Lamb (1992), matters such as hiring and firing are reserved for the staff and, in the statement above, staff emerge not as peripheral characters but as influential members of the community. Yet it remains that Big Kidness as a role will always be unavailable to them - developing toward a conclusion that Summerhill appears to have a culture wherein power is in some way partially separated from responsibility. From the perspective of staff in Summerhill, this raises an interesting issue relating to authenticity and warrant: For if being a Big Kid is central to being a Summerhillian and if staff necessarily cannot be Big Kids what kind of Summerhillians can staff be?

To conclude: The proposition developed in this article is that in Summerhill the cultural elders of the school's community are the 'Big Kids.' Moreover 'Big Kid' as a title is not merely a literal description but is the embodiment of various attributes such as; expertise, taking an active role in the community, responsibility and maturity. Big Kidness has been shown to be the last stage in a developmental continuum - revealing there is a notion of progression toward becoming a Big Kid. Further it has also be shown to be a fundamental role in the maintenance of the school's ethos. It appears that Summerhill creates Big Kidness by allowing it to develop - by creating an environment in which young people are given the power to be responsible without necessarily having responsibility to be powerful.

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