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# SUMMERHILL: SEEDS OF DEMOCRACY IN CANADA

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**Abstract:** In Canada and the US, A. S. Neill's 1960 book on Summerhill inspired the Free School Movement, in which hundreds of grassroots schools were created by parents, teachers and students. In Canada, public alternative schools were created to ensure that all economic classes could have access to different education models, but very few free schools have survived the systemic pressures. ALPHA Alternative School includes parents in the democratic partnership and relies on their advocacy. The author sees Summerhill as a vital role-model, not only for education that fosters "strong individuals and community persons," but for feisty school communities struggling to survive and, in the process, draw their nations further along the spectrum from idealized to actualized democracy.

**Keywords:** Neill. Summerhill. Free school. Alternative school. Democratic. ALPHA Alternative School, Toronto, Canada.

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## "SEEDS" in North America

When Summerhill: a Radical Approach to Child Rearing was published in 1960 it was a best-seller whose ripple effect even reached high school students in Calgary, a small prairie city in Canada. I was one. When I was sixteen, a youth group called Educational Youth Enterprises (EYE) introduced me to the critical writings of John Holt and Ivan Illich, and showed the film Summerhill. A. S. Neill's book became my escape literature: an alternate life that I struggled to make my own. Operating independently of adult control, the teenagers of EYE ran a weekly dance and drop-in center. Inspired by Summerhill and by literature from Project SEED (Summer of Experience, Exploration and Discovery) in faraway Toronto, we organized a free school in the summer of 1969. Begun to keep teenagers busy during a summer of high student unemployment, SEED was operated by the students like us, with the help of a few school trustees and teachers, and dozens of volunteers willing to share their skills and knowledge in fields as diverse as watch-making, philosophy and politics (Shukyn, 1973, p. 16).

This kind of inspired activity was happening in many places in Canada and the United States. Free School historian Ron Miller recalls:

> The opening of several hundred free schools – educational sites completely independent of the public school system – represented a remarkable outburst of radical educational dissent. Between the mid-1960s and early 1970s thousands of young educators, parents and students themselves explicitly rejected the assumptions, aims, and methods of conventional schooling and embarked on experimental attempts to reclaim authenticity, freedom, and wholeness (Miller, 2002, p. ix).

In that pre-Internet era, information spread quickly through numerous networks, newsletters and publications in which activists shared knowledge and informed one another of their projects. This was the Free School Movement: a flurry of grassroots democratic school creation inspired by Summerhill and tied to a deeply critical public argument about the purposes and means of education.

Neill would not allow any schools to be named after him or Summerhill. He called Summerhill a "demonstration school" that "demonstrates that freedom works" (1964, p. 4) and explained:

> Summerhill has inspired quite a lot of schools. There is nothing wrong in inspiration; Summerhill itself was inspired by Homer Lane's Little Commonwealth. But there is a difference between inspiration and copying. If a school is set up simply in imitation of Summerhill, that is wrong… No school, Summerhill included, is the last word in education (Snitzer, 1972, p. 13).

This is still an important principle in alternative education: that while we learn from one another's work, we don't attempt to clone or to reproduce identical situations in non-identical communities, with non-identical children. Cultures grow to meet the needs of particular environments; people are different; every person is important. Unlike reigning public education concepts that globally standardize the treatment of youth and depersonalize the fundamental community relationship of passing on the skills and values of the elders and society, each alternative school is its personnel, students and history. It responds to community needs and, as Chris Mercogliano of the Albany Free School (est. 1969) points out, it "grows" in place. American teacher/critic Jonathan Kozol declared, the "Free school, as the opposite of public school, implies not one thing but ten million different possibilities" (1972, p. 56).

## Radical Education Critique: Exposing the Hidden Curriculum

Neill's book Summerhill hit the U.S.A. at a time when both conservative and progressive education critics had declared a "crisis in the classroom" (Silberman, 1970). This critique included the cyclical moral panic that recurs in each generation, about whether students are learning their basic skills of math and reading. But it also was associated with hope for a bright future in which the potential of all youth, not just the privileged classes, could and should be realized. This hope had two main well-springs: the global human rights

initiatives that followed the World War 2 defeat of the fascists who had devastated Europe until 1945; and rapid technological advances that increased mechanization and global communications, and made possible the exploration of outer space.

As in the present, much education writing was devoted to classroom management, technique, curriculum, evaluation, and uses of technology. But many critics saw these problems as only "marginally important:" diverting attention from fundamental flaws in the structure of the dominant system. These radical critics questioned "the basic forms and methods of schools and the kinds of socialization functions the schools help perform." Allen Graubard argued: "To see that schools need radical reform depends on a perception of deep and pervasive harm that can be ascribed to the dominant structures, values and techniques of the existing schools" (1972, p. 7). Kozol confronted the public schools' abandonment of poor and Black students and the "school-fraud" that "doesn't deliver what it promises and advertises, and does deliver something poisonous and vicious that it never mentions on the label" (1972, p. 119). Many critics addressed a concept that Charles Silberman articulated in Crisis in the Classroom:

> What educators must realize, moreover, is that how they teach and how they act may be more important than what they teach. The way we do things, that is to say, shapes values more directly and effectively than the way we talk about them... And children are taught a host of lessons about values, ethics, morality, character and conduct every day of the week, less by the content of the curriculum than by the way schools are organized, the ways teachers and parents behave, the way they talk to children and to each other, the kinds of behavior they approve or reward and the kinds they disapprove or punish. These lessons are far more powerful than the verbalizations that accompany them and that they frequently controvert (Silberman, 1970, p. 9).

The process these critics describe is the powerful role played by the very structure of schooling: a phenomenon referred to as the Hidden Curriculum. Hidden is not to be confused with accidental. Radical critics noted that, while

generation after generation of measuring and layering students into age and achievement levels has failed many of them, it arguably succeeds in enforcing class divisions. They suspected that this deep flaw, which contradicts the oft-stated egalitarian aims of public schooling and persists whether conservative or progressive education fads are prominent in the day, was no mistake. The movement for fundamental change in education was related to the other movements of the day. Like the peace, ecological, feminist and gay rights movements, it was inspired by the example of American Blacks who risked their lives to non-violently claim their voting rights. According to the authors of Public Alternative Schools in Metro Toronto:

> Alternative schooling had its origins in the civil rights movements of the late 1960's as part of a wide rejection of authority and established values and as a seeking of new ways of being, particularly among student communities all over the world. The movement was not merely critical of the existing order, but actively attempted to establish workable alternative lifestyles. Naturally, there was widespread interest in changing methods of education since schools implicitly and explicitly reflect and perpetrate social values (Durno, E. and Mang, L. 1987, p. 9).

In education, this effort took the form of a bitter culture war that eventually was decisively lost to an authoritarian sweep in the 1990s. With much struggle, the work that was sustained until the present, was the grassroots creation of democratic and alternative schools.

In my mind, this repeats an earlier cycle of failed education reform in North America. Celebrated American philosopher and professor John Dewey and A. S. Neill both called themselves "progressives." In 1900, Dewey decried the "mechanical massing of children" (1900/1990, p. 34) and devoted himself to promoting public education strategies that would transmit democratic culture within a populous, industrialized nation. Dewey was as theoretical as Neill was practical, and Neill found him "dull" and long-winded" (1995, p. 243). Dewey's ideas were taught in teachers' colleges for a century, so as a student I saw him

as a hypocritical apologist for an unprogressive "progressive" system. Actually, Dewey meant what he said, but those who quoted him seldom practiced his theories. In 1916, he mourned:

> Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so entrenched in practice? That education is not an affair of "telling" and being told, but an active and constructive process, is a principle almost as generally violated in practice as conceded in theory (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 38).

It was the rebel Neill who was able to sustain his working model, and thus inspire other educators to create and sustain schools where democracy was more than a buzzword.

**Grassroots School Creation in Toronto, Canada**

During the late 1960s, Toronto was seen as a centre where visionary critique and action originated at grassroots, school and even bureaucratic levels. Public education policies were briefly guided by the controversial 1968 report known as the "Hall-Dennis Report" that, in effect, created a blueprint for decisively reforming education in Ontario, along progressive lines. Several grassroots magazines were devoted to education, and independent free schools were started by students, parents and educators. Everdale, an organic farm where students boarded during the week and went home on weekends, was one of the more direct applications of Summerhill's model. It lasted from 1966 until 1974 but it was typical of independent Canadian free schools, in that its tuition of $1300/yr proved prohibitive. As radical as it is, Summerhill's boarding school model follows a British middle-class tradition of sending their children away to school. In Canada and the US, only the top economic classes commonly do this.

So, many of the new Canadian schools were urban. The Free School Handbook, published by members of a student-run high school called Mother,

described six such schools, "which differ greatly from one another" (1972, p. 18). As in the US, schools were started in homes, churches and community centers—even informally in empty university classrooms. There were no fees: the "resource people" (they rejected the authoritarian connotation of the word "teacher") shared their expertise without pay. In Toronto these included professors, politicians, artists, professionals and tradespeople who responded to the enthusiasm of youth. This atmosphere of lively curiosity is difficult to imagine now. As young people desperate to succeed in a shrunken job market seek ever more accreditation, few seek learning for its own sake.

Canadian volunteer-run free schools of the late 1960s and early 1970s had limited, if inspiring and unforgettable, spans of life. In much of the world, the Summerhill-inspired schools that still survive today are private, fee-charging institutions. In Canada, private free schools had short lives: this vast, sparse country doesn't seem to have sufficient concentrations of like-minded people who also can afford to pay school fees. Also, though it has been under attack since the 1980s, there is an ethic of public welfare in Canada, exemplified in free public school education until Grade 12, and a universal health care program. During the brief era of invigorating education critique that opened up its public systems to alternative approaches, families expected the state to offer them equity of opportunity in educational choice, so that all who wanted could be included in pioneering schools. Activist parents, educators and students put a lot of effort into making this happen, and a few succeeded.

**Publicly funded free schools**

My 1969 student-created Calgary free school ended with the summer, but Toronto's "SEED" took hold. In 1970, SEED students received approval for a "full-time, ungraded, accredited secondary school for 100 pupils" (Nelson, Oct./Nov, 1972, p. 55). A primary (age 4-12) free school named MAGU was already operating in the nearby city of North York. In 1972, the lobbying of

two very different communities of parents resulted in their small primary alternatives, Laneway and ALPHA, being added to the public school system. MAGU and Laneway didn't survive the 1970s, but SEED and ALPHA persist. Over the decades, Toronto's collection of alternatives has grown to forty schools, each different in concept. I've been associated with ALPHA, first as a parent and then as an employee, volunteer and academic, for over twenty years.

Some of ALPHA's original proponents were concerned that "public school funding will curtail our freedom and conflict with basic objectives and priorities." A reporter for Community Schools magazine, Mark Golden, later transmitted his understanding of how this question was settled:

> ALPHA parents had not wanted a free school. Free schools were basically elitist, available only to a small and relatively privileged part of society. They wanted a publicly-funded school, hoping to use their political influence to set a precedent for other parents… (Golden, 1973, p. 22)

Golden thus articulated the importance of equity in the creation of public alternatives. But a number of community schooling activists like Golden, who were devoted to instituting local governance in all schools, were concerned that the alternative schools distracted from systemic reform. He noted: "The Board is proud of its alternatives (they are easier than changing the whole system.)" (Golden, 1973, p. 23).

Though at least some advocates of community control of public schools were dubious about the public alternatives, ALPHA's co-founders enthusiastically identified it as a community school. One recalled optimism and excitement about working with the public system of the day: "I think people thought it was a moment of possibility, where one could actually work within the system, and have the system be flexible enough to make that possible and then potentially influential." The success of "Stop Spadina," a successful citizens' movement to defend neighbourhoods from being torn down for an expressway, "was an extremely important political factor in motivating people

to think about going to the public system for the creation of alternative forms of education for their kids. 'Stop Spadina' wasn't just about stopping a freeway. It really was about questions of local control" (O'Rourke, 2009, p. 134).

ALPHA's co-founders based their argument for an alternative school on the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 26 states: "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." Noting a concurrent proposal from a "homophobic right-wing" minister and teacher, ALPHA's co-founders felt "some pause about what we were doing and what that potentially was opening up" (O'Rourke, p. 150). But this proposal didn't succeed, and the basis for its rejection is in the same document. Article 29 specifies: "These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations." So Article 26 doesn't oblige officials to indulge the whims of all school parents, but charges them to weigh any proposal within the larger human rights context.

## Local Control and Community

The "local control" that was characteristic of Toronto alternatives involved something that A. S. Neill would not have countenanced: intense involvement of the parents. Academic Malcolm Levin (who co-founded the first Toronto-area primary alternative school, MAGU) saw all Toronto alternative schools as community schools, pointing out: "alternative schools are essentially community-controlled:"

> I would argue that the central feature distinguishing public alternative schools from other schools in the Toronto system is their status as self-governing communities accountable to their own student, parent and teacher constituencies (as well as to the Board of Education and the Ministry of Education). In this sense they are 'community schools,' even though their communities are defined by common interest rather than geography. (Levin, 1984, n.p.)

Neill, sheltering his students from the "neuroses" and authoritarianism of their parents as well as of their society, never imagined such a partnership. But in North America, only parents and teachers would start democratic schools, and they persist only by constantly resisting systemic pressures. So Summerhill's example encouraged, not only democratic schooling, but local grassroots social organization and problem-solving. After all, if the kids can make decisions together, why can't the parents and teachers? In a society democratic in name but operated in good part through economic coercion and hidden authority, teachers and students learn self-governance with their students. This makes for a challenging existence, and the extension of this pedagogy to the community at large was a step not anticipated by Neill. But it's not out of line with his goals.

Critical pedagogue Henry Giroux points out that "Schools are one of the few sites within public life in which students, both young and old, can experience and learn the language of community and democratic public life" (1988, p. xiii). Former Toronto school administrator Dale Shuttleworth connected the organizational work being carried out in its alternative schools with movements toward democratic participation in other aspects of community life, claiming that they provide "new models for service provision, cooperative decision-making, cost-sharing, and problem-solving" (Shuttleworth, 1981, p. 13). As harmless and life-affirming as such efforts would seem to be, they attract strong enemies, often to the debilitating shock of the participants. Levin recalled that Toronto's alternative schools, originally "seen by many as free schools by another name," shared "a commitment to individualism, voluntarism, self-determination, community self-government, egalitarian social relationships and progressive pedagogy…" (Levin, 1984, n.p.). Noting: "Toronto's alternative public schools have demonstrated that participatory democracy and community control can work and flourish, even in a modern progressive bureaucratic urban school system," Levin also warned

that local control was "resisted all the way by those who have a vested interest in centralized bureaucratic structures and control." He predicted that "supporters of democracy in education will have to work even harder just to hold the line" (Levin, 1984, n.p.).

That pressure persists. Toronto alternative schools, whether conceived as democratic, Waldorf, progressive, or social justice-oriented, tend to lose their unique identities as they operate under public school staffing policies and regulations, and are pressured to conform to the public system's rigid scheduling, curriculum and testing requirements. This surprises most parents who seek out alternative schools. They only want their children cared for and happy at school: it can be a radicalizing shock to realize that their modest agenda is seen as a threat to the system at large. One parent whose family was at ALPHA during a time of difficult struggles with the public administration noted that, as much as democracy is theoretically Canada's inspirational myth, its social realities lie within a different paradigm: "I remember actually understanding… we strive for democracies and cooperatives and sensitivities and sensibilities, but in fact we live in hierarchies…" (O'Rourke, 2009, p. 378).

The profound result of this pressure, is that democratic education is still a foreign concept to most Canadian families and educators. To my knowledge, the only surviving Canadian schools that still consider free school concepts to be fundamental to their identities are thousands of miles apart: Windsor House in Vancouver and ALPHA Alternative School in Toronto. Both continue to struggle within their respective public systems. In ALPHA's case, the parents' volunteerism, and their governance partnership with the teachers, has fought off the complete takeover of their school by bureaucracy-driven requirements. The ALPHA Parent Group as a whole: working through committees and responsible to monthly all-community meetings operating by consensus, guards a cyclically shrinking and expanding space for student self-determination.

**Urban Challenges**

American teacher/critic Jonathan Kozol was important to the development of the urban free school. In 1966, he collaborated with twelve families to start The New School for Children, which was "begun and operated under black control" (Kozol, 1972, p. 4). Kozol decried the "relatively isolated, politically non-controversial and generally all-white rural Free School" (p. 7). (These schools were not created solely for White children: this was a result of economic and social realities.) He emphasized the responsibility to "fight these battles and work out these problems in cities where there is the greatest need…" (p.8). He was also concerned that the "haphazard, libertarian approach of many of the counterculture schools… would shortchange children and drive away poor people. I also feared that they would inevitably drive away large numbers of black parents who were otherwise devoted to the moral and aesthetic aspects of the Free School" (Kozol, 1982, p. 2-3).

Kozol argued that "without a certain degree of skillful and aggressive adaptation to the real conditions of the system they are fighting, [the Black and poor students] will simply not survive" (1972, p. 38). He emphasized the responsibility to ensure students learn to read. He found that "as many as ten or fifteen children out of twenty-five or thirty" pick up reading in the course of living, and rigid instruction programs "devitalize" their relationship with literacy. For the remainder, he declared: "for as many as one quarter or one-half of the children in a Free School situation, it is both possible and necessary to go about the teaching of reading in a conscious, purposeful and sequential manner" (pp. 30-31). This continues to be a philosophical challenge for free schools, but Kozol pointed to a number of educators who write about anti-oppressive literacy approaches: including Dennison, Herbert Kohl and, most especially, Paulo Freire. He found that the heart of Freire's strategy: working with "generative" words, different for every learner: "a body of words which are associated with the most intense and potentially explosive needs and

yearnings in his own existence" (p. 36), can work as well for a child as for a motivated adult. When offered at developmentally appropriate times, in supportive and non-threatening ways, there are dozens of ways to guide students through the critical challenge of literacy.

Kozol's critique is often used in arguments against free schools, but he wasn't arguing that only privileged people can handle freedom and responsibility. He was saying that, to make positive differences in the lives of the families who need it most and to be a true challenge to oppressive systems, schools must take responsibility to prepare students of every social class for the actual challenges they face. This is not so much a departure as a return to the roots of democratic schooling. Neill's inspiration, Homer Lane, operated institutions for "delinquent" boys and girls: highly oppressed children from often-destitute families. Lane tried his ideas on self-governance in the places they would seem least likely to work, and they brought him both trouble and opportunity.

> His belief that coercion breeds delinquency, whereas freedom can lead to responsibility, was based on observations in the Detroit playgrounds. His unconventional methods and beliefs forced him to resign his position in 1906. After a period of settlement house work, he was invited to serve as superintendent of the newly founded Ford Republic, a residential institution for wayward boys. During his six years as head of the Republic he put his ideas on teaching responsibility through self-government to the test. The boys wrote their own constitution and governed themselves by it… (Lane, 1928/1969, pp. 2, 3)

Lane would later be invited by a British philanthropist to set up a similar institution in England, called the Little Commonwealth, which is how Neill came to know of his work. It's ironic that youth democracy survived for decades in middle-class Summerhill before returning to the North American city.

**Resisting "Authority Creep"**

In order to guard the integrity of democratic education, parents and educators need to beware of something that I will call "authority creep:" that hidden curriculum sneaking up on a struggling democratic institution. The chief distinction between progressive education and radical models like Summerhill, is the attitude toward benign or hidden authority. In progressive schools, curriculum and structure are still determined by nearby or faraway "experts," and enforced from above. Neill found the honesty of a strict school, where lines of authority are clearly drawn, healthier than a school where authority is hidden:

> When there is a boss, there is no freedom. This applies even more to the benevolent boss than to the disciplinarian. The child of spirit can rebel against the hard boss, but the soft boss merely makes the child impotently soft and unsure of his real feelings. (1964, p, 52)

Erich Fromm, a social psychologist who fled the Nazis and is known as a member of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, supported Neill's work. Fromm also saw vital differences between a school where children have genuine agency and a school that uses non-violent means to channel children into preferred behaviours and activities. Fromm described how this anonymous or hidden authority undermines democracy:

> Our system needs men who feel free and independent but who are nonetheless willing to do what is expected of them… who can be guided without force, who can be led without leaders, and who can be directed without any aim except the one to "make good." … in order to be adaptable, modern man is obliged to nourish the illusion that everything is done with his consent, even though such consent be extracted from him by subtle manipulation. His consent is obtained, as it were, behind his back, or behind his consciousness. (Neill, 1964, p. xi)

Their argument is that hidden or "benign" authority replaces rebellion with impotence—not an improvement, in the eyes of these democrats.

Neill didn't claim to use "advanced" teaching methods. When children have the freedom to be active, social and playful, they don't need the kinds of entertainments offered by mainstream educators to keep them in their seats all day. When they decide to buckle down, they might pursue a creative activity or an inquiry. Or they might engage with math sheets, manipulatives or games; sight-reading or phonics—whatever works for the student at that time. Often, "soft" methods simply don't work, academically. John Holt described mainstream schooling as a situation in which children must jump through "hoops": an endless series of non-voluntary tasks. He objected that in a "progressive" curriculum, where the student is expected to "discover" predetermined facts, the student is saddled with the additional task of finding the hoop (Holt, 1972, p.87). Since the academic goals in these situations can also elude parents and even teachers, such tactics set the stage for the return of rigid education. And the cycle goes on.

**Ideology and Politics**

Neill is often seen as apolitical. This seemed to be all right with Neill who, unlike many educators concerned with social justice and the future of the earth, opposed inflicting adult views on the young:

> The only hope for the world is the abolition of "character-molding," of that authority in the home and school that gives children a slave mentality for life. A nation of molded children produced Hitler. History and geography are forgotten when one leaves school, but the emotional molding lives on… (Neill, in Snitzer, 1972, p. 16)

On principle, Neill didn't preach in his school, but democracy was the ideology that he practiced and ensured that Summerhill transmitted, through its structure.

> Summerhill is a self-governing school, democratic in form. Everything connected with social, or group, life, including punishment for social offenses, is settled by vote at the Saturday night General School Meeting. (Neill, 1964, p. 45-46)

This is no hidden curriculum, but a conviction openly stated and expressed in the structures of the school. In this sense, Neill remained the strict, protective schoolmaster, not the "soft boss." Still, he didn't enforce democracy. He seemed to take mischievous delight in watching children who stopped holding meetings experience life under dictatorship—"Heil Neill!" (Neill, 1995, p. 30), or chaos. The students seldom held out for longer than a week or two, before reinstating their democracy.

Neill was always clear that Summerhill represented responsibility as well as liberty: freedom, not license: "Education should produce children who are at once individuals and community persons, and self-government without a doubt does this" (Neill, 1995, p. 5). This was often overlooked by North American school starters, some of whom seemed to try to relive their own childhoods through their schools. Toronto's Levin pointed out:

> Ironically, while Neill always stressed the importance of freedom and the evils of compulsion for human growth and development, his strong commitment to a socialistic communitarian philosophy was largely ignored by both his followers and detractors. More importantly, while Neill regarded community self-government as the cornerstone of Summerhill, those who took up the free school label, including early supporters of public alternatives, did not stress the centrality of this theme. (Levin, 1984, n.p.)

ALPHA is a typical case. Its first year, as its families argued over its format, was described by co-founders as "chaos." In its second year, a system of short daily school meetings was instated. This Meeting spent months of trial and error working out how a rotating Committee of students could deal with conflicts and behavior problems. With their children, the parents learned that clear democratic structures are necessary for groups who have rejected arbitrary authority.

With his deeply democratic convictions and practice, an apolitical view of Neill is not accurate. I see Summerhill as an anti-fascist, pro-democratic institution that prevailed in defiance of toxic puritanism, rigid class and gender

expectations, a brutalizing British education system, rising fascism, world war, and decades of conservative attack. It weakens our integrity as educators, when we refuse to admit our own convictions and ideologies. But to avoid becoming an ideologue is vital: if we want to grow in intellect, learn from experience, and to work in ways that are positive and adaptable to real-world conditions. Neill remains relevant because he was a conscientious skeptic, who continued to question his own and his friends' ideas. His watchful, critical practicality, coupled with deep humanitarianism, is what makes his education ideas as relevant now as they were in 1960. In his eighty-eighth year, he would recall:

> I have not spent the last fifty years writing down theories about children. Most of what I have written has been based on observing children, living with them. True, I have derived inspiration from Freud, Homer Lane, Wilhelm Reich, and others; but gradually, I have tended to drop theories when the test of reality proved them invalid. (Neill, 1995, p. 241)

Neill stripped his school of arbitrary strictures, allowing life, sociability and nature to fill in the blanks and teach him what children needed. At the same time, he exercised his natural authority to keep the bills paid and the children safe, and to ensure that there were plenty of learning opportunities. This, every democratic educator is charged to do.

Neill stayed focused on what he could accomplish, protecting the children under his care and sustaining Summerhill long enough to prove that his vision of schooling works. He carefully chose his battles, expressing to his friend, the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich that "To fight too many battles is to lose the lot" (Placzek, p. 139). He modeled a workable ongoing resistance to the totalitarian forces that inevitably gain strength within our giant bureaucracies, cities, nations, corporations. Those who walk his path learn, often to their shock, that democracy—this water we think we are swimming in and are entitled to—is indeed political and, after all these centuries, still a threat to powerful interests. But to prevent the worst-case scenarios from developing,

such as the fascism that has ruled many countries in the past century, we are all charged to grab the small or great amount of courage it may require to operate in a principled way. Canadians have been fortunate in that, at worst in this struggle, most of us risk only our time, money and sleep.

**Important to the Future**

After all these years and all this inspiration and struggle, there is still only one Summerhill. That's as it should be. But now, for over forty years, there are also America's Albany Free School and Sudbury Valley, Canada's Windsor House and ALPHA… and hundreds of learner-centered schools internationally, many of them operating democratically (AERO, 2015, n.p.). Early on, Neill concluded that his education model works, but he had little faith that he could sustain Summerhill in the face of the systemic opposition of officialdom. During World War 2, he wrote to Reich:

> Of course the uncertainty of the future makes it all so difficult. We are moving to State control of everything, and after the war the middle class may not be able to send their children to private schools. All the schools will be State ones, and I can't see myself in a State school with control from above. It is queer that only under Capitalism have I been able to be a pioneer in education. I know what Nazism would have done with me, but what would a Communist State do with me? I couldn't make children sing the Red Flag or study Marx. No, Reich, the future is dark for my work, but I carry it on and will do so as long as I'm allowed to. (Placzek, 1981, p.45)

Those inspired by Neill's ideas also work uphill to sustain their schools. Summerhill is a role-model, not only of education that fosters "strong individuals and community persons," but of feisty school communities fighting to sustain their lives and, in the process, draw their nations further along the spectrum from idealized to actualized democracy.

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