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# SEEKING SUMMERHILL: A SELF-STUDY OF MY TEACHER EDUCATION PRACTICES

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**Abstract:** For the past 25 years, I have been slowly, inexorably moving toward Summerhill. Inspired by the work of A. S. Neill and other progressive educators, my journey has involved a great deal of reflection about my role as a teacher, my relationship to students, and the nature of our work together. As a result, my approach to teaching has radically evolved from being a highly formal, tightly controlled, teacher-directed style—similar to what Freire has called the "banking model of education"—to one that is now much more open, inventive, and joyful. This self-study explores my evolution as a teacher educator, paying particular attention to some of the personal and pedagogical changes that I have experienced over the past two-and-a-half decades.

**Keywords:** Summerhill. Teaching. Self-study.

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> Summerhill is the most practical place I know. There is nothing spiritual about it at all, though many people who come here say that they can feel a special kind of spirit about the place. I think what they feel is the fundamental straightforwardness of Summerhill, the truth and honesty radiating from the community. It has a strength and down-to-earth simplicity and an incredible air of tranquility (Readhead, 2006, p. 91).

For the past 25 years, I have been slowly, inexorably moving toward Summerhill. Inspired by the work of A. S. Neill and other progressive educators, my journey has involved a great deal of reflection about my role as a teacher, my relationship to students, and the nature of our work together. As a result, my approach to teaching has radically evolved from being a highly formal, tightly controlled, teacher-directed style—similar to what Freire (1970) has called the "banking model of education"—to one that is now much more open, inventive, and joyful. This self-study explores my evolution as a teacher educator, paying particular attention to some of the personal and pedagogical changes that I have experienced over the past two-and-a-half decades.

**What is Self-Study Research?**

Self-study research has seen considerable growth over the past two decades. Its emergence can be traced to several developments in educational research that coalesced around issues of teaching and teacher education in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). One influence was the rise of qualitative research, which resulted in radically different ways of understanding the nature of research, including who conducts it and how it is used. Previously uncontested concepts such as validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity were brought into question, as educational researchers moved beyond the positivist confines of the natural sciences and began to incorporate the methods and ethics of disciplines in the humanities, such as anthropology (e.g., Heath, 1983), rhetoric and composition (e.g., Ede & Lunsford, 1990), and art (e.g., Eisner, 1991). Another influence was the

emergence of teacher inquiry as a means for creating and sharing knowledge about classroom practices. Instead of viewing themselves solely as consumers of other people's research, teachers began to see themselves as producers of research too, and they turned to qualitative methods to explore questions that arose in their own classrooms (e.g., Goswami & Stillman, 1987). Closely related to teacher inquiry was the tradition of action research, which began in the 1930's as a way for researchers and workers to improve productivity (Adelman, 1993), and is now used by teachers to identify and solve the problems they encounter in their everyday work (Mills, 2013). Finally, there was Schön's (1983) notion of the "reflective practitioner," which was widely used by educational researchers seeking to explore the complexities of teacher thinking and teacher education (Hatton & Smith, 1995). When all of these developments in educational research converged in the early1990s, self-study emerged as a distinct genre of qualitative research (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Self-study can be defined as "teacher's systematic and critical examination of their actions and their context as a path to develop a more consciously driven mode of professional activity" (Samaras & Freese, 2006, p. 11).

## Methods

My self-study involves the examination of a wide range of artifacts produced over many years by both me and my students. These artifacts include course syllabi, journal writing, lesson plans, scholarly writing, student work samples, student course evaluations, informal notes written to me by students, student self-reflections, etc. Reading these artifacts has served as a powerful catalyst for self-reflection; they have stimulated many memories, both good and bad, from my life as a teacher educator.

To analyze the data, I first wrote brief narrative vignettes of my memories, using multiple artifacts to verify facts, to place the memories in chronological order, and to establish the proper context. I then studied these

vignettes and looked for key themes that characterized or connected various memories. I also identified critical moments or "epiphanies" (Denzin, 1989) that marked distinct changes in my thinking or practices. Finally, using all of this information, I crafted the following narrative account of my evolution as a teacher educator. The use of narrative writing, instead of a more traditional academic form, has the advantage of evoking greater emotion, empathy, and personal connectedness among readers, which can stimulate a deeper and more thoughtful response (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

## Beginnings

Summerhill is a private boarding school in England that was founded by A. S. Neill in 1921. Neill was a Scottish school teacher who began his career in a system that valued rote learning, moral certitude, and authoritarian structures maintained through corporal punishment. Over time, he rejected these notions and created a radically different kind of school where lessons were voluntary, students were free, and authority was democratically shared among teachers and students (Neill, 1996). Neill's famous book, Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing, in which he describes his life, his school, and his philosophy, first appeared in 1960 and has since been translated into 15 languages and sold millions of copies worldwide. It was especially popular in the United States during the 1960s, helping to spawn a substantial free school movement in which hundreds of Summerhill-like schools suddenly appeared throughout the country. By the early 1970s, most of these schools had vanished as quickly as they had begun, and the entire free school movement is now largely forgotten by educators and the public at large (Miller, 2002). Nevertheless, the original Summerhill School still exists in England after nearly 100 years of continuous operation, and it is currently run by Neill's daughter, Zoë Readhead.

I first heard of Summerhill School in 1990 when I was a beginning doctoral student enrolled in a philosophy of education course at the University

of Michigan. The class was discussing Rousseau's (1762/1979) Emile when the professor happened to mention a local private school named Clonlara that was founded on similar principles. Captivated by Rousseau's romantic notion of education, I decided to visit this school and soon became a regular volunteer. I went to Clonlara School almost every day that spring and was amazed by what I saw: a group of happy, playful children who were living and learning in a free and democratic environment. It was nothing at all like my own experience as a student, and I wanted to learn all that I could about this unique school.

Using a journal to document my impressions, I wrote the following description of Clonlara shortly after my initial visit:

> Upon entering the elementary classroom, I was immediately struck by the nontraditional arrangement of the furniture. Instead of seeing individual desks facing a blackboard, I saw a large wooden table with two benches. There was also plenty of open space on a carpeted area that covered half the room. A fish tank and a rabbit cage were near the table, while two gerbils in a glass cage rested on top of a bookcase on the opposite side. One corner, which was partitioned by a set of bookshelves, served as the computer center, while another set of bookcases and a sofa provided a cozy place for reading in another corner. There were ten students in the room, and they were extremely active. Two boys were hard at work on the computers, while a young girl lay on the couch reading a book. Another couple of girls were seated at the table playing with building blocks. In the opposite corner, the teacher was presenting a writing lesson to the remaining students. All of the student activities, except for this lesson, were totally self-directed.

The founder of Clonlara, Pat Montgomery, is the person from whom I first learned about A.S. Neill. She said that she had gone to England and visited Summerhill in the 1960s, and that she had based her own school in part on Neill's ideas. She told me that she had also been influenced by the writings of John Holt (1964), Edgar Friedenberg (1965), Carl Rodgers (1969), George Dennison (1969), Paul Goodman (1964), and others. Despite having been in the field of education for nearly a decade, I had never heard any of these names, so I spent the entire summer of 1990 reading their books. I immediately felt a

close affinity to A. S. Neill's experiences as related in Summerhill (1960), and I also grew very fond of John Holt who later become an influential advocate of home education (Holt, 1981). Reading these books, I felt as if a whole new world had been opened to me.

When my University of Michigan advisor discovered that I was spending time at Clonlara School, he expressed his disapproval. He told me that I needed to spend time in regular public schools, not some strange school from the 1960s. He felt that A. S. Neill was irrelevant to any modern discourse on education, and he urged me to read more contemporary books. Reluctantly, I stopped going to Clonlara and began to focus my attention on mainstream education contexts, but I could not stop thinking about what I had seen at Clonlara. Just knowing that schools like Clonlara and Summerhill existed served as an inspiration to me, and I began to wonder if it would be possible to implement aspects of Neill's philosophy in my own university classroom. I also began to search for a new advisor.

At this point, it is important to note that I never explicitly attempted to mimic Neill in my teaching, nor did I ever use Summerhill (Neill, 1960) as a point-by-point guide for reshaping my classroom. Rather, I simply drew upon the broad idea of Summerhill School, as well as my first-hand experiences at Clonlara, to gradually develop an overarching vision for change, building what Maxine Greene (1988) calls "the capacity to surpass the given and to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (p. 3). Over time, this vision for change coalesced with several other important influences—including those of J. Gary Knowles and Anna Henson—to gradually transform my life as a teacher.

## Gary and Anna

J. Gary Knowles was a newly-hired professor at the University of Michigan when I first met him in 1990. Having grown up in rural New Zealand,

surrounded by what he described as the "idiosyncracies of isolated island life" (Knowles, 1989), Gary was naturally drawn toward unconventional and experiential forms of education. Before coming to the United States and earning his Ph.D. from the University of Utah, he had taught in a variety of unconventional settings in the South Pacific. For instance, on the island of Fiji, he had served as the principal of an alternative residential school where more than 600 students and faculty were jointly responsible for all aspects of the school's operation, including the construction of the buildings and the growing of food. Like Neill, Gary valued self-directed learning, and he strongly encouraged me to pursue my interests rather than just the prescribed graduate school curriculum. Gary was an inspiring individual, a true visionary, and he became my new advisor.

I also met Anna Henson (a pseudonym) in 1990. At that time, Anna was a part-time doctoral student at the University of Michigan and a full-time high school English teacher in urban Detroit. With twenty-five years of experience as a classroom teacher, Anna exuded a quiet confidence in her teaching—and when she talked about her classroom, I never sensed any of the underlying dissatisfactions and frustrations that I had sometimes experienced as a public school teacher. Gradually, I found myself wondering how she had gotten to this point in her career. What did she believe in? What did she do in her classroom? To what extent were her beliefs and practices related? How had her teaching practices been influenced by the school context? These kinds of questions ultimately led me to conduct an in-depth life history study of Anna's beliefs and practices (Muchmore, 2004).

Over a period of several years (1991-1995), I visited Anna's Detroit classroom more than 50 times, assuming the role of a participant observer and recording fieldnotes. I also conducted ten formal interviews with Anna, plus dozens of informal conversations, and with her assistance, I interviewed various friends, relatives, colleagues, and past and present students. Through this study,

I learned that Anna's teaching practices had evolved from being fairly traditional, with the teacher clearly in charge, to being largely student-directed. The atmosphere of her classroom reminded me of Summerhill School in many ways, although Anna herself did not consider Neill to be an influence on her approach to teaching. Rather, her unique pedagogy arose independently from her own deeply-held beliefs about the inherent goodness and dignity that all humans possess. Seeing Anna's student-centered classroom functioning so well within an institution as large and technocratic as the Detroit Public Schools further inspired me to rethink my own teaching practices.

**Ready for Change**

Born in Scotland in 1883, A. S. Neill was educated in schools that equated learning with memorization, promoted austerity as a virtue, and demanded strict adherence to authority. Scottish teachers of that era routinely used the tawse, a leather strap, to beat children who showed any sign of laziness, inattentiveness, or indiscipline, and Neill was a frequent recipient of this treatment (Croall, 1983). Even though I was born in the United States nearly 80 years later, my own school experience was remarkably similar. For nine years—from kindergarten through the eighth grade—I attended a small, private school in the state of Kentucky. Serving as a rigorous, old-fashioned, "back-to-the-basics" alternative to the public schools, it emphasized intensive phonics instruction, proper penmanship, good citizenship, and corporal punishment. For the most part, the teachers were extremely conservative in their thinking about education, and they did not hesitate to hit children who broke their rules. I was frequently hit for not paying attention.

Like Neill, I strongly resented the rigid authoritarianism, rote learning, and corporal punishment that I encountered in school. Later, as a public school teacher, I tried to be sympathetic toward my students and responsive to their needs. Yet, ironically, I often found myself reproducing the same kinds of

authoritarian structures that I had found so unappealing as a child. Sadly, the "ghost teachers" (Chryst, Lassonde, & McKay, 2008) who haunted my thinking prevented me from envisioning any other possibility.

Also similar to Neill, I was never comfortable in the traditional role of a teacher. I did not like being the center of attention, with dozens of eyes focused on me—the students quietly, and often begrudgingly, waiting for me to begin my daily lesson. It would undoubtedly involve a lot of talking by me and listening by the students, with little or no opportunity for them to help shape the kind of work that we did. All authority in the classroom officially emanated from me, which left the students with no means of self-determination except through subversive attacks on my authority. These attacks took the form of whispering, secretive note-passing, "mock participation" and "procedural display" (Bloome, 1983, p. 277-278), and general intellectual disengagement from school. I, in turn, "fought back" with detentions, demerits, and letter grades. Teaching, it seemed, was a hard-fought battle that I seldom enjoyed.

When I first started teaching preservice teachers as a doctoral student in 1989, my pedagogy was still very traditional. I delivered lectures, led discussions, gave assignments, issued grades, and did all of the other things that college instructors typically do. I worked hard at being a "good" teacher following this approach, and my students were generally appreciative. Nevertheless, I did not feel comfortable in the role that I had created for myself. I did not like being the center of attention all of the time. I did not like being the "knowledge-giver" and the sole judge of student success. I especially did not like assigning letter grades, which always seemed to undermine students' intrinsic motivation and was usually an unspoken source of tension within my classroom. "Jim was good," wrote a student on an end-of-course evaluation form, "but I wish he had more social skills." Clearly, this student had sensed my discomfort as a teacher.

**Challenging the Authority of Grades**

After reading Summerhill (Neill, 1960), I longed for a teaching experience that was more free, more open, more purposeful, and more joyful for me and my students. Yet, I did not initially know how to attain this kind of experience. First as a student, then as a classroom teacher, and later as a doctoral student, I had been systematically inculcated into a technocratic view of education in which compliance to authority was the primary foundation of teaching. A couple of years passed before I finally felt confident enough to disturb this status quo.

My first step toward Summerhill occurred in 1992 when I decided to use a democratic process to eliminate the negative impact of letter grades in my classroom. In the past, I had felt that my relationships with students had been largely shaped through the act of grading. The power to assign grades seemed to create a subtle tension within the classroom which then undergirded everything else that transpired. After thinking about this problem for a long time, I finally developed the courage to raise the issue with my students.

I began by dividing the students into five groups and assigning each group a letter grade—A, B, C, D, and F. I told them their job was to brainstorm a list of words that they associated with their group's letter. For example, "what does an 'A' mean to you?" "What does a 'B' mean?" and so on…. After the students had spent 10 or 15 minutes making their lists, I made five columns on the chalkboard—one for each grade—and asked a representative from each group to write their list of words in the appropriate column. The whole class then studied the lists and looked for trends. For instance, the "A" column contained words such as "excellent," "outstanding," and "brilliant," while the "F" column was filled with words ranging from "failure," to "stupid," to "no good." The other columns contained words whose connotations completed this continuum.

With these lists as our starting point, we then had a lengthy discussion about the role that letter grades had played in our own lives. The students spoke about instances in which they felt their grades had not reflected what they had truly accomplished in a course, and they told how grades had sometimes actually acted as an impediment to their learning. I, in turn, spoke of my own experience as a student and how grades had negatively influenced my own self-concept. Next, we discussed other possibilities for assessment, eventually deciding through a class vote that I would not grade any of their work. Instead, I would provide written feedback and allow them to revise until we both agreed their work was at an acceptable level. Although I would still have to assign letter grades for the overall course, the process of determining those letter grades was no longer authoritarian. Throughout the semester, I was amazed at the high quality of work that these students produced, and their engagement in class discussions was unlike anything I had seen in previous classes.

**An Un-Standardized Approach to Student Work**

Since 1992, I have continued to move toward the idea of Summerhill, gradually challenging various authoritarian structures within my classroom and giving the students a greater voice in the kinds of work they do. For example, one of my longstanding assignments for preservice teachers is for them to write an autobiographical essay in which they reflect on their education processes (Muchmore, 2000). The purpose of this assignment is threefold. First, it helps the students to think about their taken-for-granted assumptions about school and learning. Second, it gives them a hands-on experience in a writer's workshop, which involves writing multiple drafts and sharing them with a critical yet sympathetic audience of peers who offer constructive feedback. Third, the act of sharing their papers helps to foster a sense of community within the class—a sense of knowing and caring about each other—which I consider to be an essential part of any learning environment.

Over the years, I have gradually given my students more and more freedom over how they approach this and other assignments in my courses. This shift can be traced directly to an incident that occurred in 2000 when I was teaching at Western Michigan University. A week after I announced the assignment, a student came to me with a rough draft and asked if she was headed in the right direction. She explained that she had already spent 40 hours working on it, and she wanted my approval before continuing. There was a combined look of joy and trepidation in her eyes. She was immensely proud of what she had done—hence the joy. Yet, she also felt that she had to please me, and that was the source of her trepidation. She instinctively knew that I, as the teacher, had the power to undo all of her work simply by saying, "No, that's not what I want." Realizing that she had deviated significantly from the assignment, she anxiously awaited my response.

Instead of writing a standard paper, this student had created a graphic representation of her education history that was exceedingly personal and reflective. It consisted of 10 two-dimensional works of art—ranging from pencil sketches, to tempera paintings, to collages—each representing a distinct moment of her education. Within these works of art, she had embedded strands of text that complemented the visual images, and she was also working on an audiocassette tape to provide a musical accompaniment to her story. I was absolutely amazed by what she had done. With multiple layers of meaning and no real beginning or end to her story, she had transformed my simple autobiographical writing assignment into a postmodern exploration of self. She smiled when she saw the look on my face; I told her that I could not wait to see the final version.

Before discovering Summerhill School, I doubt that I would have permitted a student to deviate so far from one of my assignments—or to deviate at all. At the same time, none of my students would probably have felt comfortable enough to assert themselves in this way, so it was never an issue

that I had to face. However, my experience with this student's project showed me the tremendous amount of work that someone would put into a project if they were given the freedom of creation. As a result, I began to share the story of this student's project with future classes and told them that I was much more interested in what they made of the assignment than in their ability to follow a rigid set of instructions. Since that time, dozens of students have responded by creating autobiographies in the form of songs, oil paintings, video essays, mock newspapers, poetry, graphic narratives, plays, artifact boxes, photographic essays, fictional diaries, scrap books, unsent letters, handmade books, and the list goes on. Currently, approximately half of the students in my classes choose to embark on these kinds of creative projects, while the other half still write papers. They all have the freedom to choose how they wish to approach the assignment, and like Neill, I do not stand in their way.

**Student Responses**

The written feedback that I now receive from students is vastly different from the feedback that I used to receive. No longer do students comment on my nervousness or say that my class is boring. Instead, they tend to comment on my relaxed demeanor as a teacher, the openness of my classroom, and the meaningfulness of their work. For example, one student wrote in an end-of-course reflection:

> I cannot get over the excited look in your eye every day of class, not just some days, but every one. This is something that I will always remember. Thanks for being supportive and thanks for leading by example on how to be an effective and caring teacher.

Similarly, other students have regularly written comments such as the following:

> • You treat us as equals rather than as our authority figure. This attitude leads to an inviting classroom atmosphere. The easygoing

> mood of the class invites ideas and communication. We know we are not going to be put down when we speak up.
>
> • I truly mean that this was the best class I've had in my time here at Western. I have never had a class where I have felt so comfortable with both the other students and instructor. I felt that all of what we covered in our class sessions will be of use to me in the future as a teacher. I never thought to myself, "Why are we talking about this?"

Students also frequently comment on the free and democratic nature of my teaching, writing statements such as the following:

> • I have never been in a class that has given me so much creative freedom. I actually enjoyed the work in this class. I think that I produced some of my best work from the writings I have done during the semester.
>
> • Especially in a college setting, I was surprised but extremely impressed with your intent to create a democratic atmosphere. With the group work and class discussions, we created a self-regulated learning environment that positively influenced our education and hopefully impacted how we will structure our own classes as teachers.

I do occasionally receive feedback that is critical of my teaching, with comments that sometimes indicate a fundamental disagreement about my role as a teacher. For example, some students come to my class with authoritarian ideas about teaching that do not change over the course of the semester. Instead, they become frustrated by what they perceive as my lack of leadership, and they end up criticizing me for not asserting myself and forcing them to learn. However, these kinds of students are rare.

## Conclusion

This study is an example of self-reflection leading to a personal transformation. Early in my career, I did not find teaching particularly enjoyable. My relationships with students were formal, businesslike, and superficial. Students commented that I seemed tense, that I seldom smiled, and

some even said that my class was boring. Now, I eagerly anticipate my class meetings and consider them to be the highlight of my day. Echoing this feeling, one student wrote in her end-of-course evaluation, "I actually looked forward to coming to this class. There were so many times when I would be having a not so great day, and then I would come to this class where it was almost a relief."

For me, Summerhill School represents a vision, an ideal, a sense of possibility in my classroom, and I continue to look for ways to improve my teaching practices. Like Neill, I strive to create a learning environment that is characterized by freedom, caring, honesty, and self-determination. Yet, I am sometimes fearful of losing it in the face of ever-increasing calls for tougher standards, tighter control, test-based accountability, and technocratic structures in teacher education (e.g., Fuller, 2013; Polikoff & Porter, 2014; Zeichner & Sandoval, 2015; etc.). Neill himself acknowledged the difficulty of implementing his ideas in a public school setting.

> Any young teacher in a big school will find that it is impossible to appreciably depart from the school curriculum, or for that matter from even the school traditions or customs. A teacher in a regular school system cannot use as much freedom as he might like to. True, he can be on the side of the child, he can dispense with punishment, he can mitigate some of the homework, he can be human, he can even be jolly. Yet, in the ordinary overcrowded classroom such a free-wheeling teacher may find himself in all kinds of difficulties (Neill, 1966, p. 59).

Nevertheless, while it may not be possible for me to recreate Summerhill in its entirety within my university classroom, I am happy to have found several small openings that have afforded me the opportunity to move toward a more humane and student-centered pedagogy.

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