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HANGING AROUND, POTTERING ABOUT, CHILLING OUT: LESSONS ON SILENCE AND WELL-BEING FROM SUMMERHILL SCHOOL

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Abstract: This paper highlights moments of the doing of "nothing much" as beneficial and educative as pedagogy for all schools. It uses Summerhill School, Suffolk, UK as an example of a school where chosen silence of a cumulative, positive, "strong" kind is valued – in the form of children choosing to hang about, potter about, chill out - and which as a school has this facilitation of the doing of nothing much to teach to other school settings.

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What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
(Davis, 1911).

Introduction

This invited paper highlights moments of the doing of "nothing much" as beneficial and educative as pedagogy for all schools. It uses Summerhill School, Suffolk, UK as an example of a school where chosen silence of a cumulative, positive, "strong" kind (see Lees, 2012) is valued – in the form of children choosing to hang about, potter about, chill out - and which as a school has this facilitation of the doing of nothing much to teach to other school settings.

Summerhill is an example (there are others) of a proper democratic school. "Proper" means in contradistinction to schools employing undemocratically delivered citizenship programmes hoping to inculcate democratic values (Harber, 2009a). Summerhill School employs a forum – a school General Meeting (see Fielding, 2013; Goodsman, 1992) - with equal votes for all children and staff in deciding on debates about issues arising in the school. It is not socio-political democratic education (e.g. Gutmann, 2008) but individual democracy lived out with commitment to its quality, in the context of a small community (see e.g. Appleton, 2002; Goodsman, 1992, for commentaries about this from the "school floor").

This gives Summerhill - as an example democratic school in and for this paper within a special issue on the school and A.S. Neill - a chance to enact

freedoms that in other schools are not available: a child as student can hang about (not go anywhere purposively but stay and dwell alone or with others), potter about (not do much but just do little things for pleasure), chill out (relax, chat, dream, reflect and wonder). Hanging out, pottering about and chilling out are part of the education at Summerhill: the school does not highlight in its democratic forum of issue-resolving that these activities might be a problem for the education to hand. This is because in spirit and action they are unlikely to cause others harm and are part of the freedoms of Summerhill. If they did in some way cause an issue for members of the community they would be brought up as an issue, but the point is that at Summerhill doing nothing much is allowed. As Neill states "freedom but not license" (1966), meaning the children can act as they please so long as their actions do not harm others.

I am interested in this freedom and the democratic schooling conditions which allow hanging out, pottering about and chilling out to be in place when in other schools compulsory lessons are scheduled. My interest stems from my own involvement in an increasing body of research into the benefits of forms of silence for education and for personal as well as communal well-being (Burke, 2010; Lees, 2012). Quite simply, where schooling uses chosen forms of silence they are doing something pedagogically interesting, as I discuss in more detail below. The idea I present here is that children in most schools do not get enough access to such silence, whereas at Summerhill they get plenty, albeit of a particular form. Along with this lack of mainstream access to silence forms is a lack of choosing, choice and freedom: access to silence depends on these because the relationship between silence experienced as positive rather than negative and active, non-coerced personal choice for it is symbiotic.

This paper will explore these links to dwell on the joy and well-being which can come from not being stopped from being essentially unproductive; the joy of relaxed non-productivity of the chosen "silence." I posit that children, in particular, in a neoliberal age of measurements, achievements for progress

and pressures to "succeed" and all its attendant stress (see e.g., Burns, 2016, 4 April) should be free to choose to not enact educationally and instead do nothing much. Summerhill as a democratic school is a very good example of this freedom for positive silence experience allowed, although other democratic schools also behave in this way such as Sudbury schools in the US.

In the face of assumptions to the contrary, where children are pressured to gain skills (Tiger mums, incessant testing and its concomitant preparation of skills to pass, helicopter parenting, national, local or familial talk of being the best and most successful along with the so-called proving of it through tests), there is room for disagreement with neoliberal pressures on children. Is it not natural that children should be actively (not just by virtue of neglect) enabled to just for a while do nothing and be nothing?; be given or be enabled to find that time to "stand as stare" as the poet W.H. Davis said in the poem "Leisure" above? Should such leisure not be particularly of and for the child? These days there seems less and less concept for this as valuable for children. I hope with this paper to reignite interest and debate about "no education as educational" in education.

This matter, and Summerhill School's contribution to it as a good example, goes not just to heart of what education is and can be but further and deeper. It addresses concerns we might have around meaning in and from life and the living of it in a knowledge economy of capitalist mentality, where competition to succeed is so widely promoted as what life is about (see e.g. Obama's "Race to the Top" education agenda or the World Economic Forum's yearly "Global Competitiveness Report" including the education pillars of competitiveness). Alternative education as a whole goes against this trend as a lifestyle stance (see e.g. Lees, 2014 or Neuman and Aviram, 2003) and offers a political and personal voice for the individual to be at peace with their individual choices for living rather than in a homogenising competition of lifestyles and behaviours.

Doing nothing in silence

With use of the word "silence" an absence of noise, or oppression, or denial is not intended. Perhaps surprisingly, the idea of noise or a lack of it is not intended either. Silence here is a positive situation experienced as a "state of mind" (Lees, 2012): a calm feeling of one degree or another which could be occurring amongst noise and busyness.

Furthermore, "doing nothing" is not to indicate sitting cross-legged or still in meditation (itself involving effort to concentrate on a focus). The doing of nothing means here nothing nameable as world-contributing item of self action useful to advance one's interests, large or small: literally, "nothing much" occurs or is done. Something small: a stick drawn through sand, the making of a snack, a walk, reflection on a bench in the sun, a spontaneous chat. This sort of thing. Here is an excerpt from a research study on Summerhill by Goodsman, which aptly exemplifies and expands on what I mean by "nothing much" or more crudely "bugger all":

> 16.5.[19]83. 10:00[am]
>
> Three boys in the "pits" (some large holes dug in one of the wooded areas of the school), trying to turn a wreck of a car over.
>
> Several kids of mixed ages sitting on the Carriages seats.
>
> Three of the cottage kids playing in the sand pit.
>
> Two of the cottage kids in the cottage, one of them is ill in bed, the other is chatting to him.
>
> Some girls in the girls carriages are working at their desks.
>
> Another group is bleaching their hair.
>
> Two kids are playing cards.
>
> (Goodsman, 1992, p. 31).

There is a lot going on here. Some of it we can recognise as academic activity (the girls at their desks) and therefore may find it easy to see this as education. The car wreck turning, the card playing, etcetera, may be more difficult to compute as education in action. Apart from its "conversational" qualities, which we find in the domain of home education are a fundamental part of the education in progress as efficient and full-time (Thomas and Pattison, 2007), there is a silence here: a lack of directive discourse, a positive state of mind for leisure. Rather than dwell on the pedagogy of the conversational which would involve an entire other paper, I wish to focus attention on the hanging about, pottering about and chilling out elements involved in these activities. This is the pedagogical element that it is suggested here is linked to the research area of silence in education.

When we find children doing this "stuff" whatever it is, there is a wider context than the moment: the experience offers escape from "The deepest problems of modern life" in having to "preserve the autonomy and individuality of his[her] existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life..." (Simmel, 1950/2013, p. 24).

The silent (state of mind) doing of nothing much is, whether engineered or not, an act of resistance, albeit unperformed: a happening apart from deliberate self preservation but which nevertheless preserves. It may look like children at Summerhill, when they hang about, potter or chill out are "lazy" or "unproductive" or that the school is a laissez faire "dreadful" place (Neill, 1937) for not forcing the children to engage in lessons, but I am suggesting that education is involved in this seeming nothing much. These times are acts of education of self and other in legitimately experiencing and finding spaces of resistance against the forces of others to perform what one is not but can be pressured into being by external forces that one might not even understand or notice. This is a bad pressure. The lack of pressure that hanging about, pottering

around and chilling out entails is no doubt not just good in its education of self to not perform in such a way but also enjoyable. One of my own greatest pleasures is in doing something that is not essentially that productive such as sewing up a tear in a scarf, drawing, watching a TV drama, looking at a bird. These things are precious for not contributing much to the progress of my life. They are also essential downtime from the stresses of work, family life, planning, cleaning, tidying, shopping, cooking, light bulb replacing, gardening or whatever. For psychological reasons they contribute to my well-being but they also teach me to "stop" and enjoy and relax, instead of rush around doing and progressing things incessantly. This is in essence what the silence techniques of meditation and mindfulness are: breaks and pauses in incessant doing and ego-being (Nhat Hanh, 1990). Children more than any adults need this form of breaks into silences from meaningfully discoursed life on account of their requirements for meaningless play, in order to develop as rounded, psychologically secure adult contributors (Gray, 2016).

Below I will point to a scientific basis for imagining this form of silence as beneficial. Summerhill as democratic school is offering space for resistance against negative pressures and bringing enjoyment in nothing much to fruition in the lives of children. It is not nothing much then. It is a big deal, educationally significant: politically resisting, learning to stay true to one's own desires for action, being and becoming, learning in community to follow one's interests rather than succumb to peer pressures, experiencing what it means to be in space and time without stressed expectations for actions and achievements, learning how to play, how to form friendships, how to care, how to rotate a heavy object with (likely) limited resources. Most of all the educational significance here exposed is the learning of what it means to in-dwell with forms of silence-as-pause, which in a world fast losing touch with the value of silence and its natural place in human life (Prochnik, 2010; Mahler, 2016, 4 March) is a very valuable lesson.

Another kind of achievement

Without the dialogic exchange of the Meeting/s at Summerhill - in the sense of no voice for the student - there would be no chance to experience the kind of given or widely agreed freedoms of Summerhill as school. The voice in and of the forum creates the space of the freedom just as throughout time a chance to speak freely has sometimes been able to offer the chance to secure freedom in the face of oppression or injustice: the right to defend oneself being a cornerstone of democratic law and a fair trial, for example. In this freedom caused by voice at Summerhill is an escape route. The child can achieve escape from the socio-historical limitations imposed on self (Foucault, 1986) which in our post modern times are increasingly and particularly about success, becoming something successful and being seen to gain skills. The escape is created by not using their voice-as-discourse to take part in any programme for success. Children at Summerhill can achieve a space, by being silent (as a state of mind not requiring or demanding speech even if some speech is involved). In that silence is furthermore found or developed a calm/er/ish state of mind, for self-reflection, for what Foucult calls "work on the self" (1986) or the use of a "technology of the self" (1988) to self form into an autonomous being.

My claim then is that Summerhill as school is achieving a pedagogic gold in this regard, by virtue of a combination of features as set out in the educational philosophy of A.S. Neill (1968). Following Sloterdijk's appropriation (2011) of the religious term "perichoresis" to denote a three way interrelation with "mutually shared being" (Otto, 2011), I suggest Summerhill has created and achieved an example of how to treat children kindly in education, how to allow them to be themselves and not to perform to another's tune with all this doing of nothing much. This angle on the Summerhillian educative contribution gives credit primarily to the democratic ethos which when in combination with freedom to do nothing much is symbiotic:

Freedom to speak and have voice in the Meeting because of the pauses of silence between points of debate wherein various voices can emerge unhindered by the pressure of other's dominant speech. + The freedoms of this stance for the right of the child to "say" or choose what they need and want allows for a choice for silent being and doing nothing much in and among other forms of being, thus striking a needful balance between acting, achieving and performing and just being in a more "still" rather than active, doing, acheiving way. + Silence as chosen allows for beneficial experience and outcomes and on account of the experience of the wellbeing of silence the children have calm manner in which to enter into the forum debates as well as the education those debates care-take

The perichoresis of democratic education as a force for educational goodness

Silence in Summerhill would not be there without the democratic philosophy of education in place. Having just indicated theoretical points above about how silence behaves in relation to democratic "manners" – the interdependent and symbiotic relation between them whereby the first element links to the last and the middle one is dependent on the first and last and so on - it is necessary to expand on the features of silence for which I am making claim with regard to its potential to bring wellbeing.

First, however, it is useful to dwell for a moment further on this idea of perichoresis, with its relevance to silence in the context of a democratic school. Not enough has yet been said to push this point of silence and the democratic as linked.

> Perichoresis could be regarded as a kind of theological black box. It has been used in the history of theology as a means of filling a conceptual gap in reflection upon the Trinity and the hypostatic union in the incarnation. This gap has to do with how it is that the two natures of Christ, or the persons of the Trinity, can be said to be united in such an intimate way that, in the case of the Trinity, there are 'not three gods, but one god', and in the case of the hypostatic union, there are not two entities in one body, but two natures held together in perfect union in one person. Perichoresis fills this gap with the notion that the two natures of Christ and the persons of the Trinity somehow interpenetrate one another, yet without confusion of substance or commingling of natures. (Crisp, 2005, p. 119).

This sense of mutuality is something I have brought up in other work (Lees, 2016) as relevant to the idea of "good" or "moral" education as democratically inclined. Here it applies to Summerhill and the thesis of this paper in that the mutual respect of the democratic in the personal and in the community is a respect for mutuality, defined as:

> In a mutual exchange one is both affecting the other and being affected by the other; one extends oneself out to the other and is also receptive to the impact of the other....Through empathy, and an active interest in the other as a different, complex person, one develops the capacity at first to allow the other's differentness and ultimately to value and encourage those qualities which make that person different and unique. When empathy and concern flow both ways, there is an intense affirmation of the self and paradoxically a transcendence of the self, a sense of the self as part of a larger relational unit. The interaction allows for a relaxation of the sense of separateness; the other's well-being becomes as important as one's own. (Jordan, 1985, p. 2).

We see the same mutuality emerging from uses of positive silence in schools, as reported by those with long-standing experience of using silence practices such as meditation or mindfulness there (Lees, 2012). There is a silent "interpenetration" of selves on account of a lack of discourse with all its dividing features (the binaries of words used in identifying success and failure for example). This leads to forms of harmony in schooling (Erricker & Erricker, 2001). Furthermore silence itself is a substance that knows no prejudice or judgement: it is there without boundaries or reasons to withdraw and responds in mutuality of spirit to seekers. In other words, democratic manners in education have a similar nature to silence (Lees, 2012).

Summerhill is not known for meditation or mindfulness so I am not suggesting it offers silence in this sense of a techniqued practice. Rather Summerhill is known for children who go down the woods to make dens or play with bow and arrows in the yard or hang around the art room or woodwork shop or who find themselves (potentially) in the doing of nothing lessons-wise. I am saying that these pauses in performing, doing, enacting a public deliberate-

self-in-the-world that education in mainstream schooling (where democracy in the personal and communal does not hold sway) struggles these days to offer, are a form of silence. Summerhillian hanging about, pottering about, chilling out – its seeming aimlessness that a UK inspectorate report condemned (Grenyer, 1999), is part of the movement of today for mindfulness in schools as beneficial. Crucially silence requires choice to be relational (Lees, 2012) so technically really good forms of silence in schools for self and community would only be found in democratic schools. Summerhill School has achieved an(other) educational excellence in the occasional and supported-as-natural doing of nothing much, whilst other children elsewhere rush from lesson to lesson.

Background to forms of silence as educationally beneficial

Research into the use of (silent) mindfulness and meditation for children is growing apace. A recent 2015 Wellcome Trust grant awarded to Oxford Mindfulness Centre (part of Oxford University) will research a large cohort (thousands) of school students to investigate longitudinal profits of silent mindfulness for school children. The UK parliament has debated in a 2015 committee meeting its benefits for schooling and produced a report arguing for uses of mindfulness for society and schools (Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Committee, 2015). In the US David Lynch and Goldie Hawn both run highly funded foundations dedicated to silent techniques in education for well-being. Of all the forms of positive silence, mindfulness is perhaps becoming the most fashionable and well known form in education.

In 2010, Burke conducted a review of recent research linked to mindfulness-based approaches with children and adolescents and found that the research was showing mindfulness—emptying of the mind to concentrate on the "present now"—not only showed no down-side but showed active ability to ameliorate conditions affecting young people such as Attention

Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (Burke, 2010). Improvements for this condition were also found with meditation practices (Harrison, Manocha, & Rubia, 2004). Huppert did a clinical trial in a school using mindfulness practices and found that regularity of practice helped the well-being of otherwise neurotically inclined children most (Huppert & Johnson, 2010).

There seems however no bounds to the march of progress of silence into education nor justifications for why one form over others might trump or be deemed superior: all forms of positive silence are of interest. A significant element in this is the broad interdisciplinary scientific evidence base for forms of positive, "therapeutic" silence – from going slow, to meditative sitting, to siestas and so on - as beneficial (in contradistinction to oppressive silences) in and for a wide range of social domains.

My own research into the practices of silence in schools (Lees, 2012) shows that an art for using silence educationally involves various approaches, which need to be talked about, managed and changed if not working—teachers interviewed about this spoke of improvements in behaviour and learning from working uses of silence for educational ends. Their strategies with silence always, interestingly, required a negation of coercion and an assumption of choice to participate or a request to not spoil the participation of others.

Summerhillian silences of the not-doing-much kind that I suggest are a natural part of a school which does not force children to attend lessons and respects their choices about how to spend their time are, based on the vast literature discussing silence in education and beyond, valid positive silence practices. They are a form of break, pause, indwelling with self without deliberated or delineated discourse. As such then they fall into this category of fashionable and viably useful silences for well-being: the ones governments pay attention to these days as part of good practice and foundations fund as having potential to help society. Furthermore they are – surprisingly perhaps for those who denigrate Summerhill's lack of coercion to attend lessons as uneducational

– highly educational. The educational impact is contributions to relationality, mutuality, being calm, happy, self-empowered and reflective (Miedema, 2016). It is also about assessment and doing well with it, ironically, in that children without stress are better disposed to learn. Comments from users of silence as found in my own research (Lees, 2012) for the effectiveness of silence for educational purposes—across a broad spectrum of learning, interpersonal and personal outcomes—are backed up by the research of others also (Erricker & Erricker, 2001; Ollin, 2008; Schultz, 2009; von Wright, 2007, 2010, 2012; Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004).

At a deep level of the self the perichoretic democratic-freedoms-silence nature of Summerhill is meaningful. There is evidence from psychoanalytic uses that silence allowed can offer therapeutic benefits. The following shows how important silent time –the not doing of much - might be and become to an individual. The situation contextualising the below excerpt is a therapeutic session with a boy named Dick having difficulties in his family life, who never spoke in the many sessions he had with the therapist, until one day he suddenly asked:

> Dick: How much time do I have left?
> Therapist: Seven minutes, Dick
> Dick: I might as well for rock a while. (He goes and sits in the rocking-chair. He closes his eyes and quietly rocks.) How much time do I have left now?
> Therapist: Five more minutes, Dick.
> Dick: (sighs very deeply): Ah, five more minutes all to myself. (Rogers, 2000, p. 246)

In another account, this time from a school teacher, the boy in question has experienced a deep trauma:

> ... I made a quiet area directly outside the classroom door, where a large window provided a view of the pastoral country setting beyond. On the wall I hung a peaceful poster of a young child on the grass holding a small bunny, and on a small wooden TV table I placed my homemade rock garden. I brought out a wicker chest donated by a parent, upon which I placed a large, thriving philodendron plant. It was a simple setting, but James, a tense, hesitant, distrusting child, was clearly drawn to it; he used it often, along with the other children. I saw how raking the paths around the pebbles in the rock garden calmed him. Sometimes he just sat and looked out the window. At the end of the year he gave me a hand drawn picture of himself in the classroom and across the top he had written, "I love this class. I wish I could be in it next year." From then on, I always found a way to incorporate a quiet/peace area in my classroom. (Haskins, 2010).

Critical psychologists such as Klaus Holzkamp have identified the value of "serenity" which may involve stopping action and exchanging it for nothing: to allow for periods of being bored, wandering, etcetera. Crucial elements in having choice and power to determine actions are freedoms Holzkamp saw as the foundation of good learning. He suggested a child cannot be:

> ... permanently compelled, besieged, forced onto the defensive and hence have to opt out, pretend and consent to weather the situation, but could freely relate to the possibilities school offers. (All educational science and didactics in the world remain futile if not built upon these basic prerequisites.) (Holzkamp in Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013, p.131-132).

The possibility Summerhill offers its students which few other schools do offer is that of doing nothing much.

Conclusion

Recent reports on stressed school students are frightening in the tale they tell of modern education being both undemocratically inclined and harming the minds of young children through test pressures (Coughlan, 2015, September 30). Silence of a chosen kind is a panacea. I would venture, based on my understanding of the outcomes of silence from exposure to numerous examples

of evidence to this effect in research literature, it is a solution for pressured atmospheres (see Lees, 2012 for an overview and links to other relevant work). For it to be positive and beneficial however there is a condition: it needs to be actively chosen and integrated meaningfully into an individual's life through free engagement and seeking for its solaces.

Summerhill school as a democratic environment example is a school where silence in any form can be beneficial because of the freedoms of the setting and its organisational principles: "freedom, not license." Being with silence or dwelling in silence through the hanging about, pottering about and the chilling out I have suggested is possible and happens at Summerhill, is not a fantasy, it is a reality, albeit one unusual for education these days. With that comes lessons for mainstream education. Links to silence in and from and with this democratic pedagogy can be acknowledged and attributed to Summerhill as a school and as a particular educational experience.

As I keep mentioning, is not possible for silence to be positive if it is not chosen and for all those schools currently working with forms of silence I believe they will find out sooner or later that their way of organising relations between staff and students and between students needs to involve the democratic for silence to work optimally. Or they will discover that silence makes their school more democratic, whether they like it or not if they decide the silence is too beneficial to ignore (see Lees, 2012). In this regard Summerhillian doing-of-nothing-much as possible is an educational leader in this area of silence practices and opportunities for children of current great interest to teachers, philanthropic bodies, policy makers and politicians around the world.

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