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# DOSSIER –
# TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT SUMMERHILL SCHOOL

This special edition brings 14 papers about Summerhill, the world's first democratic school. It aims to present good material to help educators to better understand the idea of Summerhill.

You will read about authors' direct experience on Summerhill and/or how they have changed the way the think about education after Neill.

"I would rather Summerhill produced a happy street sweeper than a neurotic prime minister" A. S. Neill

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*EDITORIAL*

# ABOUT A FREE SCHOOL: SUMMERHILL

**Ivan Fortunato**

Itapetininga, 02 de janeiro de 2017.

I have always hated schooling, so I cannot explain why I went to the university to become a school teacher. I ran into "Summerhill" by accident when I was passing by a bookstore of old/used/rare books and it cost me only pocket change. Unfortunately, I had never even heard about the possibility of a free school during the years I have spent at the University.

For reasons I cannot grasp, very few academics in Brazil are willing to read and discuss Neill. In fact, I have written a paper about freedom and self-government that was reject by at least five journals because it was "out of scope"... Therefore, over the past few years I finally understood that Summerhill is not only a word few people have heard about, but activists have been relating Neill's work with the "anarchist pedagogy". That is harmful to Neill's memoirs, ideals and his effort to establish a democratic school aiming to foster happy people.

That is the main reason I started putting together a special edition for Summerhill: I believe we should focus on changing school itself and try to make it a place of freedom and self-government where students do not have to attend classes unless they want to - no matter how young they are. I do agree with Neill and I believe that I am not the one to decide the important things that youngsters must learn.

People who participated in this edition wrote about multiple aspects of Summerhill. I hope these ideas spread around only to make school education a little less harsh.

*DOSSIER*

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

**Ivan Fortunato**[1]

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

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

**Keywords:** Complexity. School education. Summerhill. Freedom.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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*DOSSIER*

# SUMMERHILL "DIALOGUES" WITH THE VIVA OLHO DO TEMPO SCHOOL AND GRIÔ PEDAGOGY[8]

**Antonio Sobreira**[9]

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the pedagogical proposals of Summerhill School (Leiston, England, 1930) and the Escola Viva Olho do Tempo (Joao Pessoa Paraiba, 2004). Both experiences are guided by happiness and non-compulsory education for children and youth revealing the amplitude of democratic schools in different socio-cultural realities.

**Keywords:** democratic schools. Autonomy. Culture. Griô pedagogy.

[8] Translated to English with the author's permission by Professor Ivan Fortunato, Ph.D. The original paper will be published in Revista Hipótese, v. 3, n. 4, 2016.

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## Introduction

Summerhill[10] is known as the "school without doors"[11]. The mystification that has developed on it is reasonable. Its admiration is, however, so little productive as the critics that surround its nearly 100 years of operation. Some people have overcome these two possibilities and have developed similar projects.

In Brazil and in the world there are various experiences of democratic schools, happiness or without doors. Those that existed in the 1960s and 1970s were closed or forced to alter their practices.

This article will point some observations about the Summerhill school and seek an arbitrary dialogue with Griô pedagogy practiced by Viva Olho do Tempo School, or CHP-EVOT (in Portuguese).

Alexander S. Neill founded Summerhill in 1921 in the town of Leiston, Suffolk region, northwest of London. It is the oldest, notorious and controversial school based on libertarian education and to dispel confusion, we considered more appropriate to call it school of freedom or democracy, which the English language causes fewer problems, since the term libertarian education for Latin languages always approaches of socialism, anarchist or autonomist.

AS Neill died in 1973, leading to assume the school, Ena Wood, his second wife, who was in place until 1985, when her daughter with A.S. Neill, Zoë Neill Readhead (1946) became the principal of Summerhill, and has been it ever since.

Its headquarters is housed in a Victorian townhouse, donated by a benefactor interested in Neill's ideas, and it is flanked by trailers, huts and temporary buildings, a swimming pool and an area of about two hectares for the students free walking. The initial project was designed to assist children in

[10] During doctoral studies, a short visit in Summerhill in 2008 was held.
[11] For up-to-date information, visit the official website: http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk

trouble, but later it was opened for any child whose parents were interested in the experience.

The international character of the school is visible. Gribble (1998, p.8) states that in 1994, British children were only a third of students, while another third came from Japan and the other from several different countries.

From the beginning, Neill included subjects of the official curriculum in school, following the Compulsory Education Law; however, at Summerhill teaching is informal, there is no rigid schedule of classes, and children are free to come and go when they want to watch them. No obligation to attend classes did not prevent former students to became teachers of various levels, doctors, engineers, painters and writers. This corroborates the words of A. S. Neill who claimed to be preferable that the person was a happy street cleaner than a neurotic minister.

In this school, according to Gribble (1998, p. 6): "The child is free from family tyranny, escapes the Oedipal conflict, loses the fear of paternal authority figure and learns that it is not wrong to masturbate". As an example, the author reproduces the testimony of a former pupil of Summerhill that elucidates the school effect on those who attended it: "Here you learn by asking questions, Summerhill let you do that. I also learned many things through mistakes without feeling stupid as it was in other schools "(Gribble, 1998, p.11).

The essence of Summerhill, according to Gribble, is to allow students to take control of their own lives, which is separated from the adult world and protected from inappropriate practices related to this world, apart from advice and paternal expectations and bad influence of adult authority: “Kids put by themselves their limits on their freedoms, ensuring that their lives are more secure and happy and likewise decide when it is important to attend classes” (Gribble, 1998, p.21).

Much of what is said about this licenseness in Summerhill derives perhaps from the shock that the observers get to see young people smoking[12] or performing any feat that seems negative to hasty glances. The use of illegal drugs is not a current concern, as this has not been observed and its acceptance is not a moot point. Readhead says there is frank dialogue on this issue and the responsibility of each one with one's own life.

Readhead (2006, p.82), also a former pupil of Summerhill, reports that in her time, children of the same age and both genders slept together as in their own homes. Currently, they have been forced to adopt "silly" rules about the number of toilets and sinks that the school must have, and also different dormitories for boys and girls over eight:

> What a crazy illustration of the world in the new millennium. So many regulation, só much fear of litigation – but is it really any safer than it was in the 1960s? I don't think so! I might add that youngest, the 'San' kid (aged 6-10), are still sleeping in mixed-sex rooms – and we fully intend it to stay that way (Readhead, 2006, p. 82).

According to Gribble, A. S. Neill believed that children should accept the rules of care related to health, food, clothing and bedtime, but that these requirements should be based on mental health and their learning. This means that these recommendations could be changed in assemblies: "Sometimes this belief went against the decisions of the assemblies, and from time to time, children were withdrawing the bedtime until health effects becomes obvious, then they re-establish the previous rules" (Gribble, 1998, p.6).

The existence of compulsory syllabus (by law) does not change the decision about "letting children be" and about when they want to learning. Still, the curriculum is unconventional. But there is a mechanism, the "Special

[12] Summerhill is currently anti-smoking and only students over 14 years old can smoke, but there are fines. If a student smokes outside the school one must pay a fine of £ 5 and doing so within the premises, £ 10. These questions are put to discussion during meetings about health and smoking (Readhead, 2006, p.155).

Attention List" to cover learning gaps, which usually are emotional driven difficulties (Readhead, 2006, p.152). In Summerhill, newcomers teachers need to learn to control their anxiety to teach:

> Every teacher who comes to Summerhill has to face the reality of children sometimes not turning up for a lesson. I think it would be wonderful it all teachers had to face this reality. It would certainly make them think about what they teach and how they present it! There are some important points about being an experienced Summerhill teacher, as opposed to just an experienced teacher. Some of them find that whereas they were used to being the nice bloke in a more repressive system, suddenly when they get to Summerhill they seem to be 'Mr Strict'. Summerhill demands that you reevaluate what you are doing (Readhead, 2006, p. 98).

According to Readhead (2006, p. 99), there is no correlation between doing a good job and a full class, nor the requirement to measure students by the number of evaluations submitted, much less by the grade they get from these exams. This means that not only the student is free from pressures, but teachers as well as.

The syllabus in question was formed by the usual disciplines of England and several others countries, including math, science, geography, history, wood with neat, English, foreign language (Chinese, German, Japanese, Spanish), music (piano, percussion, guitar, singing, trombone, trumpet, music technology and sound engineering), dancing (scratching and breakdancing), theater and cooking. In addition to these disciplines, teachers are free to offer different ones or at the request of students, working themes such as magic or the lives of elephants. There is still interest in democracy, citizenship and international relations.

Readhead (2006, p. 98) states that when a member of Summerhill decides to study, one does not accept the new teaching methodologies and rejects facilitation strategies:

> On the whole, our teachers teach in a fairly conventional way. The Summerhill kids tend to be a conservative bunch when it comes to classes. They like to sit down and have the subject dished up to them. Occasionally we have had teachers who wanted to try new contemporary ways of teaching, but the response was usully that the children thought it silly and just wanted to be taught 'normally'. If you choose to go to class you are usually ready to learn and don't need the work to be sugar-coated to make it palatable (Readhead, 2006, p. 100).

This is the result of an educational work that advocates that students are responsible for their own learning. So this facilitated learning package, constantly trying to seduce students, ends up being something really childish and boring at Summerhill. Some newcomers teachers have great difficulty to adapt to this principle, as it shows part of the testimony of Jason Preater, English teacher:

> […] The Summerhill system protects teachers from their own neuroses about achievement and it protects children from teachers' anxiety. The school says that children will come to learning when they are ready for it. They may have a lot of other important stuff to do before they make it to the classroom. They may make it to the classroom several times before they eventually decide to do some serious work there. They won't have to sit in classrooms for months on end achieving nothing and feeling like a failure (Readhead, 2006, p. 101).

In Summerhill no one is forced to say "thanks", if it is not sincere. One should thank the other if the situation between them deemed worthy of appreciation. There, "thank you" is a precious expression. This is something that is also part of British culture, but in community life, rules of politeness end up being a burden. And none of this means that Summerhill children are hostile and cold.

In 2005, Summerhill had 88 students and did not change much, it was more than the average of 60 enrolled and had no significant change from the time it was conducted by A. S. Neill. Readhead (2006 p. 72) said that there was no major change in the behavior and philosophy of school in these years and

stated: "How could I change the simple philosophy that children should be free to make choices about themselves and we all live as equal members of the community".

However, there are changes in other aspects: there is more emphasis in the classroom, the effect of the new generation that comes to the school and its priorities. Assumes Readhead (2006, p. 73) that this is a result of external influences or pressures from family environment, but not directly from parents.

Readhead (2006, p. 152) discusses that there are genuine reasons and not genuine that keep students in school. As true reasons, she mentions the fact that students have many interesting things to do, such as playing football, instead of studying, or exercise their freedom and make their own choices. On the contrary, aversion of formal classes system, inhibition and constraints caused by a default pattern for people, such as fear of failure and learning difficulties, are considered non-genuine, in which case it becomes necessary to support the monitors of "Special Attention List".

Readhead (2006, p.107) writes about the time she was invited by a former student for her graduation in mathematics at the University of Leicester. At the graduation Readhead said to the student that she had never seen her studying mathematics, and the girl replied that she had never studied this discipline during the four years she spent in Summerhill. Therefore, Readhead states:

> When they have left formal education our ex-pupils are very diverse lot. Many of them go in for work that gives them a degree of freedom to make their own route. We have artists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, university professors, carpenters, scientists, musicians, chefs, actors, gardeners, farmers, newspaper reporters, filmmakers, technicians, photographers, cancers, computer programmers, writers, illustrators and careers for disable people. They also make fantastic entrepreneurs – a result, perhaps, of the creativity they developed at school as well as the talent they have for dealing with people (Readhead, 2006, p. 107).

Other aspects that Summerhill are proud of are individuation, the relationship between groups of different group and how sexuality is seen among

students. Readhead said how enthusiastically she watches a child playing by herself or doing things without being involved with others, because this is a safety test.

Sexuality follows the path of self-knowledge for these young people, and the teacher is enthusiastic when, even with no difference regarding how the school deals with boys and girls, he/she realizes that girls are more confident about themselves, and boys are lighter and gentle. There are among them great friendships and romantic love affairs, without the occurrence of malicious or speculative comment.

It is very hard to believe that self-knowledge is a different thing from the understanding of life itself. In a free school, to know oneself and how one is with others is more important than skills and information.

The same behavior occurs in different democratic schools, that is, knowing oneself driven, according to Paideia School (Merida, Spain) of anarchist pedagogy; Being before knowing! Formal education in the world the principal is reverse: Having before being! (cf. Martin, 1993).

**Viva Olho do Tempo School (Joao Pessoa – Paraiba - Brasil )**

My first contact with the Congregation of Paraiba Holistic Viva Olho do Tempo School - CHP-EVOT was in 2014. It is situated in a ruro-urban area of João Pessoa in the Valley of Gramame, which flows into the sea between mangroves and sandbanks of Gramame bar, south coast of Paraiba.

My first impression came from the sound of music instruments played at the the Brazilian rhythm of Maracatu. A pathway, made by tiles and mosaics, with a hopscotch pattern in this multicolored floor, is in the middle of two two-story buildings. One of them is the place for management, kitchen, community library, studio and Viva Olho do Tempo Museum. The other contains the house of its creator, Master Doci, the dance and digital station areas, and the children's library. The garden and vegetation flank all buildings and in the lower part of

one of these blocks there is the theater and in its opposite site there is a small dining room that can fit 30 children.

Beyond the building, there is a strong slope and a remnant of the tertiary Atlantic Forest with trails that goes along some springheads that lead to a floodplain. This trail holds places for observation and contemplation; and it can also host meetings and classes.

Since 2004 people have been asking Master Doci about his plans for a place that had nothing!? And his answer is: I will plant humans! I will plant dreams!

This region is divided between a rural community of peasants, quilombolas[13], fishermen with indigenous features that also culturally bear these arrays of coastal people of Paraiba and recently a working-class urban low-income, it is almost a dormitory neighborhood if it there were low unemployment.

In Paraiba, as in many places in Brazil, the access to boarding schools are not widespread and despite the criticism and difficulties that these schools have to deal with, they make a huge difference in the quality of life of these children. To fill this gap, the CHP-EVOT develops a project to attend part of the children and young people through which they call Eco-Education. This project does not conflict with regular school hours.

The CHP-EVOT is managed by a non-profit association with certification of "Organization from the Civil Society for Public Interest" (OSCIP in Portuguese). It has two focuses: the preservation of 8 springheads around campus headquarters and to attend children and teenagers of the surroundings. Its creators have been trying to offer:

[13] This refers to settlements established by refugees African-American slaves between the 16th and the 19th centuries.

> [...] an educational alternative to outline ways in which the inhabitants of the region can start the search for self-knowledge as collective beings, and thus strengthen the sense of community in their living spaces. This quest is nothing more than the most powerful establishment of a cultural identity that arouses in the residents a sense of belonging to their space and their ethical, moral and cultural values, bringing to oneself the comfortable feeling of living in community (CHP-EVOT, 2015).

The eco-educational goals of the CHP-EVOT acknowledges the importance of integrating environmental, culture and education protection. There is, therefore, an effort to enhance the memory and social interaction with the community seeking to build sustainability projects that take action in the local reality.

There are many actions in the defense of Gramame River and the popular culture, such as the social museum built with community support and by offering regular education art workshops in the field of performing arts, singing, dances and popular games, storytelling, community library, Brazilian rhythms, digital stations, planting trees, creating eco-educational trails, events and celebrations in support of communities. In addition to these local actions, there is participation of children in concerts and festivals with local and national renowned artists who know the proposal and identify with it.

The proposal to adopt the Griô Pedagogy came later, but initially they had already established an official effort to protect socio-cultural, social memory and tangible and intangible heritage. To the extent that these educators were approaching the community, the more they start to appreciate and understand the popular knowledge and oral tradition, which arethe pillars of what is now called the Griô pedagogy.

Griô or Griot is a term from Africa with a French accent and therefore it receives criticism and disagreement about the relevance of foreignness and not all these oral traditions should be flushed to popular masters of orality without this classification. However, if there is this level of disagreement and claim of a name, concerning the delimitation of Griô Pedagogy, its pedagogic

properties have characteristics that make it a specific crop with less resistance. A Griô a master cannot serve the Griô pedagogy.

The Griô pedagogy combines art, culture and popular games, mysticism and enchantment by the oral tradition and, through those elements, seeks to bring people close to reading and the appreciation of local social memory and the Brazilian people.

The various experiences of reading groups, and other sotry-telling are included in Griô Pedagogy and can be confused with those reading approach approaches. In appreciation of Lilian Pacheco:

> For Griô Pedagogy, relations between the included and the excluded open an infinite field of obvious dichotomies, hidden contradictions, and epistemological errors. And our focus of reflection happens between the following dualities: experience and consciousness, mind and body, popular and erudite, emotion and reason, institution and community, tradition and modernity, myth and reality, identity and ancestry, I, the other and the whole (Pacheco, 2006).

So the practical actions are not based on the formal education but incorporate suggested precepts and developed by Paulo Freire and social educators. In other to defend this perspective Pacheco says that the Griô Education:

> It's a walk on the earth, in the alleys, streets, squares, OSCIP, points of culture, in the yards, in the yards of the houses, in the kitchens, in the fields, groups and traditional organizations in socially excluded world, in education informal among the people. Empty and musical listening, body and feelings delivered to the motion, vision committed to integration between the various forms of elaboration of knowledge through art, science and the oral traditions of our people. Committed to the potential of human identity and the diversity of emotional and cultural intelligence of people to express themselves, bind, celebrate life and knowledge passing it from generation to generation in the diversity of ethnicities, epistemology and ecological systems in which they live.

According to this, Griô Pedagogy is part of the scope of a popular education based in the oral tradition and socio-cultural memory, so incorporating what is called ancestry and social constructions that are not present in formal school.

One of the elements that the CHP-EVOT uses are group discussion. These are hardly something like the junior assemblies of democratic schools, but they meet the need to discuss in a more intimate way with children and young people about their wishes and difficulties.

At times, there are volunteers from the field of psychology that accompany some children and young people, as some come to school with a past life of absences and short of affection that need to be worked so they can gain greater attention and follow both their desires and face the facts of their daily lives.

There are cases of children who are at risk of child labor or other vulnerabilities arising from their families or social environment, these children are sheltered and receive both affection and care.

The homophobia, religious intolerance and other biases are worked out in ongoing discussion; after all, these people are in touch with a society that has not yet fully reached the understanding of human rights.

Artistic involvement and activities associated with affective shelter try to put an end to these children and young people concerns that, for various reasons, do not enjoy the peace they deserve.

From this work, a few important cultural groups have been formed such as the Maracatu group, Drummers from the Valley, the Culture Point "Memoirs and Oral Tradition in the Valley of Gramame", the Cirandeiros of Gramame Valley, the Valley Lights young singers.

The main projects developed by the CHP-EVOT are:

1) Program Ecoeducação Culture and Memory Valley Gramame, developed since 2008 is a non-formal education action with activities covering the fields of culture, environment, digital inclusion, sport/leisure and reading in order to provide children and adolescents knowledge building, experiences and practices to enable greater ownership of reality, seeking alternatives to transform it, for improvement in quality of life. The activities are also aimed at educators and families through educational experiences and community life, making everyone involved feel they are protagonists of a process built collectively, considering the completeness of the human being, including one's desires, knowledge and practices. The activities are developed considering its core to be the identity and ancestry, taking into account the living history, the environment, the oral tradition and the Gramame Valley memoirs. The program seeks also establish partnership with the government and the private sector targeting fund raising and improvement of public policies.

2) Cultural Encounter of Gramame Valley, which is in its edition, started in 2006 from the need to put the philosophy of EVOT at service of a project that would encourage the residents of the valley to express themselves artistically through their creations and reflections, focusing on the reality of the region where they live, and that would result in contemplative and reflective works, but it would also challenge them before the daily facts, sharpening, especially their critical capacity. All this is condensed in a celebratory event, of full enjoyment, without competition, with the participants around the beauties and problems of their community life. Every year the meeting produces a CD or a DVD with the compositions presented by the residents of the Valley communities. The project aims to interact city professional musicians

with community amateur musicians through the proposal entitled "musical godfathers". These professional musicians voluntarily contribute to this project

3) St. John's Rural, developed since 2005, aims to strengthen the traditions surrounding the June festivities, from its religious aspect to ingrained cultural traits as the cuisine, costumes, music, dance and everything that exists in hearts of the Northeast, but that has suffered interference that seriously jeopardize them. It takes place on March 19th, the day of Saint Joseph, which begins the St. John's Rural programming. From there it holds a party every month, covering the Gramame Valley communities and exploring the cultural expressions of the region. The St. John's Rural closes in July, with the Santana celebrations. This project is developed in partnership with the entity making up the Agenda 21 Lower Gramame and with the support of the local government.

4) Reading Incentive developed since 2004, working to encourage reading and formation of readers that takes place systematically through reading circles and storytelling, making use of the Community Library institution's collection. This work also involves circles of conversations with teachers and community griôs by sharing stories, myths and legends of Gramame Valley, as well as sieves of experiences, square dancing, poetry and storytelling with these teachers and griôs.

5) Memoir / Patrimonial Education/ Griô Action. The actions involve traveling, training meetings, workshops, seminars, partnerships, joints, cultural shows, nature trails, experiences with griôs and teachers of oral tradition. Actions based on Griô Pedagogy are developed as a patrimonial education process taking since they are grounded in

recognition and appreciation of local cultures and identities of the Gramame Valley region. In this context, EVOT has been building spaces in which teachers share their stories, knowledge and practices through circles that take place at the organization's headquarters, as well as in the classrooms of formal schooling, squares and other community spaces. The experiences take place also in the backyard of the masters, who welcome the community and visitors who integrate their palys.

6) Environmental Education facing the predatory development of natural resources, the EVOT maintains, since 2007, a reforestation project of the green areas of Gramame Valley region, which is, so far, in the planting of more than a thousand Atlantic native trees, especially in the Lower Gramame region. This activity is included in the environmental education activities developed by the organization, involving children, youth and adults who are growingg an understanding of the importance of green in their lives, beyond the urgency of revitalizing the Gramame Rio and springheads in the region. More than planting trees, this project reinforces the purposes of Agenda 21 by promoting, through environmental education, the political thinking founded on the preservation of nature, essential to the present time.

**Establishing some dialogue between Summerhill and CHP-EVOT**

All schools that prioritize happiness have in common some level of Children and Youth democracy. Not all can move forward in radical freedom and the right to self-assertion of that freedom.

The social context of the country formation and its economic constraints can guide the pedagogical projects within the margins that tend to separate its goals from its needs. It is also common that in many of these schools for happiness and democracy the radical approach of the arts, which involves some

anarchist base of schools, such as Walden School in Berkeley in the U.S.A. (Sobreira, 2009).

However, projects are distinguished by their creators and in rare cases they are a government initiative. Denmark, Israel, Finland and Japan carry examples of government schools. In Brazil there are very few government schools who targets anti-authoritarian education.

Summerhill receives funds from rich parents and mothers, so they guarantee to work without the need to generate income. In addition to this factor, the students are not engaged in environmental and social causes as a priority, but in individuation.

A school like CHP-EVOT has traces a path of social movements for better education thus it does not abstaining from the social emergency of family and society in which they operate. In this sense, even not making specific policy choices, its practice targets a just, equitable society that considers the condition of social exclusion an element to be fought against.

The maintenance of CHP-EVOT is both carried out by voluntary work and in competition invitations to bid, agreements with the federal, state and municipal governments, but also by campaigns of individual and corporate partners involved with offering services or resources as well as was mentioned earlier, through solidarity events.

The affection, emotion and shelter for these children are the most important concerns of CHP-EVOT and such parallel cannot easily be done with Summerhill for its cultural characteristics. The issue of Summerhill is to eliminate neuroses.

It does not seem that this educational line can easily take place in Brazil, where the affective demand is, in many cases, the central issue for the educators. In the English case, the kind of autonomy is subject to arrive in hedonism streaks, while in the case of CHP-EVOT pedagogical decision is itself

affectionate first, before any other measure, which means dancing, hugging and express affection are encouraged.

The Griô pedagogy is consistent with this feeling of CHP-EVOT and presents a question for the children and young people that has not yet been evaluated. During the time they spend in the happiness of school, they are concurrently under the conditions of public schools and its difficulties and inability to meet these children and young people in their intellectual and emotional needs.

It is difficult to imagine a child of 8 years in Brazil leaving for a boarding school, including, with the clear objective of separating them from parental neuroses. These are cultural issues that are better accepted in England, given its boarding school tradition.

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*DOSSIER*

# 90 YEARS OF FREEDOM – AFTER SUMMERHILL: WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PUPILS OF BRITAIN'S MOST RADICAL SCHOOL?

**Hussein Lucas**[14]

Submission: 01/06/2015 Review: 05/09/2015 Acceptance: 05/09/2015

**Abstract:** In this paper, the author brings highlights from his book "After Summerhill". Its main purpose is to describe the main concepts about Summerhill education and to find out is outcomes. In short, the author seeks to answer "what happened to the pupils".

**Keywords:** democratic schools. Summerhill alumni. Freedom.

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**What happened to the pupils of Britain's most radical school?**

Looking back on the long journey I set out on to discover the answer to the above, I suppose these words from a former pupil impressed me more than any other: "Summerhill wasn't really about education, it was about finding out about yourself – really finding out about yourself, and being accepted for who you are. That was the most important thing about Summerhill". This was said by Tom, a young man with learning difficulties. If any one person convinced me of the value of Summerhill, he did.

As Mark Twain famously said, "You should never let your schooling get in the way of your education". That is the heart of Summerhill. It isn't really about schooling – it is about education in its broadest sense.

I found the picture of Summerhill presented by its founder A.S. Neill in his different books enormously attractive. It struck me as a portrait of a community that was able to organise itself according to principles which in many ways seem at variance with society at large, and yet created happy, fulfilled people. The question loomed – what happened to them afterwards?

Every society has its own ideas about how best to prepare its young for dealing with the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood. Ideas are constantly being revised and modified – never more so than today when the society the child is about to enter is undergoing such bewildering and accelerating change.

Neill's apparently absurdly naïve answer to all this was – do all you can to ensure the child has a happy childhood, free from coercion, and everything else will fall into place: promote happiness and all will be well. But the question remains, how do you promote happiness? For Neill, when he founded his school in 1921, it was a case of letting the child decide what it wants to do. If it wants to play all the time, let it. Trust the child to find its own way, and as much as possible stay out of the way. Children learn anxiety from adults, so don't

interfere. Rather than the three Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic) promote the three Fs: freedom, fresh air and fresh food.

This is all very well, you will say, but how do you prevent selfishness and anarchy? Neill's answer was self-government. Disputes and chaos are dealt with by democracy in action. At Summerhill there are the weekly meetings, mostly chaired by one of the children, where the whole community gathers to debate issues, reach decisions and pass or amend laws by voting.

As for laziness, Neill's response was that no free child was ever lazy – only uninterested or unwell. But of course it isn't that simple. Or perhaps it is, but not that simple to live, as I found out during the course of my conversations with old Summerhillians.

And this was what led me to engage with the undertaking of this book[15]. I wanted to find out two things – how did Summerhill work in practice and what were the long-term effects? Because the success of any endeavour should ultimately be judged by its outcomes.

How different was the experience of Summerhillians to those in mainstream schooling, and how did it affect them in their lives subsequently? What qualities, if any, did they have that marked them out as being different from those who underwent conventional schooling in terms of their capacity to prevail?

Naturally, I decided that I'd better take a look at the school. The place was quite scruffy, which I found reassuring. No false front. (I should mention it has considerably smartened up since then; a great mistake according to some former pupils). The children were not like any other group of kids I'd seen. They seemed unusually relaxed and self-contained. They didn't put on any airs or show any deference or hostility or suspicion towards any of the adults. Indifference isn't the word – 'ease' describes it better. I had the feeling they

[15] LUCAS, Hussein. After Summerhill: what happened to the pupils of Britain's most radical school? Published by Herbert Adler.

would behave exactly the same whether there were adults or strangers around or not. There were no signs of aggression. Also, they hadn't that air of being in captivity, which is the feeling I get from so many kids in a school environment. They were just getting on with things in a very relaxed manner.

At the same time there was something unnerving about it all – because it was something I had never previously encountered. And I suppose the key to it is freedom. In retrospect I think I was experiencing the fear of freedom that the philosopher-psychologist Erich Fromm writes about. It is unnerving because it is so seldom encountered, so you don't quite know how to adapt to it. Apparently many adults, when they visit Summerhill, behave in strange and sometimes bizarre ways. It seems to me that if your whole life experience has been one of having your freedom curtailed, and you have developed a way of being derived from that, then to encounter a society that has a completely different ethos is likely to disorientate you. But above all my recollection is one of a feeling of exhiliration. I felt I had found what I was looking for, and it was real. Because you never know with books that inspire you, whether you can trust the reality they purport to describe.

More than anything, what struck me about the school (or perhaps community is a better word) is its tremendously down-to-earth quality. It's about people getting on with things without other people telling them what they should be doing; and learning how to live with others. In the end, it's about having faith in human nature and above all trusting that the child will find its own way. That's how Summerhill avoids a culture of conformity and anxiety.

But it was the long-term outcomes I was most interested in. I've met and interviewed a lot of old Summerhillians, many more than appear in the book, and been very impressed with all of them. They are diverse, but what they have in common is that they come across as authentic personalities who are generally content with their lives. I feel that they know who they are and are really speaking from themselves. They're not trying to impress because they have

nothing to prove. As children they've never been judged and found wanting – at least not during their time at Summerhill. There's something very straightforward and direct about them. They speak as they find and as they feel, yet they're not without sensitivity. There's no obliqueness or hidden agenda. No concealment. As one former pupil observed, "This is nothing like the world of Harold Pinter."

Regardless of their level of intellectual ability, they come across as intelligent in the sense of possessing 'an enhanced capacity for the enjoyment of life' as I once heard intelligence defined. I suppose today you would say they have high levels of emotional intelligence. They haven't felt the need to be self-consciously different or to rebel, because they haven't been required to conform. They know who they are because they've been free to find out.

The evidence suggests that being at Summerhill doesn't lead to your being all at sea when you go out into the world at large, although some of them have spoken of a difficult period of transition. Adjusting to the sick world, I would say, to the majority who suffer from what Wilhelm Reich called 'the emotional plague'. It's evident that Summerhillians can adapt; they are very flexible without actually compromising their integrity; they can be direct without being impolite, or even more important, inconsiderate.

And for those of you who fear Summerhill may not nurture a child's intellectual development, here is a quote from the late David Barton, who was a professor of mathematics at Queen Mary, University of London, where he said, "I learnt to do my thinking at Summerhill." As Neill said, "Set free the emotions and the intellect will look after itself."

I've met people from Summerhill who admit that they were terrible, almost frightening as kids. Yet as adults they're fine. So it's not principally what Summerhillians are like as kids, it's how they are when they are adults that's most impressive. That's how I feel education should be judged: not how many paper qualifications you've got but what you are like as a human being when

you're 60 and whether you have the courage and human resources to engage with life. As one former pupil put it: "Above all, Summerhill has given me a fundamental sense of wellbeing which has lasted throughout my life."

If you have a free and happy childhood it's an inner resource you still draw on when you're 80. A well that never runs dry.

When I first read *Summerhill* by A.S. Neill I thought it the truest, most insightful, down-to-earth and honest depiction of human nature that I'd ever come across. Over 50 years later I haven't changed my mind.

**Paper based on the book:** HUSSEIN, L. **After Summerhill:** what happened to the pupils of Britain's most radical school. UK: Herbert Adler, 2011.

*DOSSIER*

# SUMMERHILL SCHOOL: MAKING TIME FOR CHILDHOOD[16]

**Matthew Appleton**[17]

Submission: 01/06/2015 Review: 05/09/2015 Acceptance: 05/09/2015

**Abstract:** In this paper, the author brings some memories from the time he lived in Summerhill to explain how the school is.

**Keywords:** Freedom. Neill. Childhood.

[16] The paper was originally published as "Summerhill School: Making Time for Childhood. The Idler. Issue 37, Spring 2006, p. 84-95", republish granted by the editor Tom Hodgkinson

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> "Many pupils have been allowed to mistake the pursuit of idleness for the exercise of personal liberty" Ofsted Report.

**The 'Do-as-You-Like' School**

A few days ago I dropped my 13 year old daughter, Eva, off at Summerhill School for beginning of term. I was in her room helping her unpack, when a couple of girls rushed in to announce that a particularly annoying boy was on his way. Eva quickly locked the door got on with unpacking. A few moments later there was a knocking on the door and a boy's voice calling her name. She rolled her eyes and ignored it. After a few moments of banging loudly he shouted "Bitch!" and threatened to find an axe to smash the door down with, before stomping off. Eva, completely unperturbed continued her unpacking. Later as we left the room a spray of water hit me straight in the face and I found myself facing three girls, who were dissolving into a mixture of giggles and apologies. They had been waiting to ambush Eva or one of the other girls in the room and did not expect a parent to emerge. Eva found it just as funny as they did.

The atmosphere was more like that of a large family than a school: a family in which adults were included as equals. Some adults might find it uncomfortable to be treated as one of the crowd, rather than a figure of authority. Some parents might find it disconcerting to find strange boys calling their daughter a bitch and threatening to destroy her bedroom door with an axe. But I felt very at home at Summerhill as, indeed, it had been my home for nine years, when I had lived and worked at the school as a houseparent. Eight years have passed since then, but the easy-going flow of interactions between kids of all ages and kids and adults was familiar terrain to me. It did not occur to me for a moment that the boy at the door was going to turn into a pre-adolescent version of Jack Nicholson in the film 'The Shining'. He was just venting his frustration at Eva's shutting him out. The moment passed and later they were behaving with each other as if nothing had happened.

Technically Summerhill is a boarding school, but it has little semblance to the traditional notion of boarding schools. No-one wears uniforms. The children swear freely without fear of being told off. Adolescent couples wander around with their arms around each other. Small children weave around small groups of talking adults, totally involved in their own play, no-one telling them to walk, not run or to not get so excited. Summerhill has often been a focus of media attention, generally portraying it as the 'do-as-you-like school' where unruly children run wild. But there is a lot more to Summerhill than sensation-seeking journalists, who have spent little more than a couple of hours at the school, would have us believe.

Summerhill was founded in 1921 by A. S. Neill, a Scottish teacher, after becoming disillusioned by conventional schooling methods. He saw these methods as a way of breaking the child's will, rather than supporting the process of learning. Neill was influenced by psychoanalysis, which had introduced the then radical notion of the unconscious, and by seeing many of the children he taught going off to be senselessly slaughtered in the First World War. He sought to create an environment in which children could be as free as possible to be themselves. Motivated by the belief that children are essentially 'good' by nature, he considered this 'goodness' was warped by adult attempts to mould the child into unnatural ways of being. The 'goodness' Neill proposed was not the naïve, sentimental innocence that so-many adults attribute to children, but an innate capacity to develop into emotionally open and socially responsible individuals. It was freedom, he declared, that allowed children to stay in touch with and grow in accordance with their inherent 'goodness'.

Neill maintained his championing of freedom for children until his death in 1973. Fifty years of experience did not change his mind. Summerhill continues today to embody the same principles that it did then and is run by Neill's daughter, Zoe Readhead. It is located, as it was for most of Neill's life,

on the outskirts of the small town of Leiston, in Suffolk. Very much an international community, Summerhill draws children from all over the world. It is a small school, with less than a hundred pupils, aged roughly between 7 and 17. Most of the children board, though some of the younger ones are 'day kids' and go home at night. When I was living at the school I was the houseparent for the 10 to 12 year olds. Neill dubbed this age group the 'gangster age' as they often arrived new at the school having been in mainstream education long enough to have built up a full steam of resentment and rebellion within themselves. Neill sometimes took on quite difficult and disturbed children and allowed freedom to do its work on them. He observes in his books how they began to soften as they resolved their conflicts in the context of a tolerant and easy-going community. I saw the same process at work in my time there. Children whose difficulties would have been compounded by trying to force them to conform to the conventional system of punishments and rewards, became relaxed and sociable with a little time and patience from the community. But I don't want to give the impression that these young 'gangsters' are a particularly troubled bunch. Even the children who were most 'well-behaved' in their previous schools, once the pressure was off, allowed aspects of themselves, that had hitherto been kept under wraps to come to the surface. In doing so I saw them become more rounded and confident in themselves.

**Making and Breaking Laws**

It may then come as a surprise that Summerhill has many rules or 'laws' as they are called. There may be 200 or more such laws at any time. These laws are not dictated by adults, but are proposed and voted on in regular community meetings, in which everyone, adult and child alike, have one vote. The voice of a 7 year old had equal weight as that of the Principal. In most schools and homes children learn only how to break the rules, not how to make them. At Summerhill the children are fully involved in the whole process and therefore

understand and appreciate the reasoning behind the laws. When a community of children sit down to decide the parameters by which they are going to live, they make practical laws based on experience and in relationship. For example, if the smaller children are running around the dining room when the older children are trying to eat, someone may propose that they are not allowed in at that time. Or if some of the 12 year olds are putting pressure on the younger children to borrow things and the younger children are finding it difficult to say no, someone may propose a law saying there has to be one of the older kids or an adult present to make sure no pressure is being exerted. Children do not propose or vote for laws based on abstract codes of conduct, such as everyone needs to hold their knife and fork in a certain way or wear a certain style of dress. They naturally come to distinguish between what Neill called 'freedom and licence'. Freedom is doing what you want as long as it does not interfere with someone else. License is doing what you want without caring about the consequences.

The popular notion is that left to their own devices children will throw all caution to the wind and chaos will prevail. Experience at Summerhill does not bear this out. On one occasion when I was living at the school, we had a lot of new pupils straight out of mainstream education, ready to flex their democratic muscles in the meeting. This was at a time when we had more than the usual number of young children and a large group of adolescents, who had grown up being part of the law making process and knew their value, had left. Having a strong majority this bunch of new pupils threw out all the laws, with the exception of a handful of health and safety laws that are not open to the meeting. Certainly it was chaotic for awhile, with no bedtimes and children riding bicycles up and down the corridors. But within days the community started to vote the laws back in, as they felt the need for them, and by the end of term nearly all the laws were back in place. This experience taught these

children that these laws were not just arbitrary and authoritarian, but were there for a reason.

Of course, like anywhere else, the laws get broken all the time, but anyone who wants to has recourse to the meetings to ask for something to be done about it. For example, if someone uses another person's bike without asking, that person can bring a case against the offending individual in the meeting. The person who took the bike can offer an explanation as to why he or she did so and, a vote is taken on whether or not they should be fined. This may just be a strong warning not to do it again, or a small money fine, or to go to the back of the lunch queue. In my experience the community is generally good-natured and fair when it comes to fines. The few individuals who called for heavier fines, were always the moralists with bad consciences of their own. Through their use of the meetings the children learn practical boundaries rooted in personal interaction. These are not incomprehensible orders barked at them by bigger people, as many children experience in their lives. Nor is there the lack of clarity that comes when the boundaries are not there, either through neglect or from parents who are afraid of confrontation. Meeting the 'no' of others, as long as it is reasonable and can be mutual, gives us the sense of self and other we need to form healthy relationship.

One of the things I always appreciated about the meetings, was the lack of resentment when things did not always go the way people wanted. I remember once bringing a case against a group of big adolescent boys who had been making noise in the night, in an area of the school that they were not meant to be in. This was the culmination of a series of occasions I had been woken up in the night and I argued for a substantial fine. They argued just as passionately against it. But this time the meeting went in my favour and they were fined. As the meeting closed and they filed past me, each of them gave me a big hug and apologised for waking me up. There was no resentful sulking or left over tension, either on their part or mine.

**Time to Play**

Another aspect of Summerhill that people often find hard to comprehend is that that lessons are not compulsory. Children only go to lessons when they decide they are ready to learn. People often argue "I would have never learnt anything if I hadn't been made to." My reply would be "Of course not, your desire to learn was killed in you by that very act of being made to." Part of my present work involves teaching adults and, even though they are wanting to learn, I see how much fear they bring with them to the learning process. Compulsory education has undermined their capacity to inquire and replaced it with an anxiety-based need to get it right. Their nervous systems reverberate with the fear of being seen as stupid, instead of resting in the open, receptive state that is conducive to taking in and processing new information. This is a real handicap for many adults and a direct result of the way they have been educated.

When Summerhill children do go to class they tend to learn quite quickly, as they are motivated. They have been able to play as much as they like and are ready to engage with some structured input. Most children do not get enough time to play and be in their own worlds, so find it hard to concentrate at school. They become bored, restless or anxious. Neill declared that if the emotions are free the intellect will look after itself. Certainly as I reflect on the children I was houseparent for, who are now in their mid to late twenties, they all seem to be doing very well in their respective careers. Most went onto further education and now have degrees in a variety of different subjects, some very academic, some more artistic. I have met a broad range of ex-Summerhillians over the years, spanning the whole 85 years of the schools existence and only a handful expressed the feeling that they wished they had been made to go to lessons. For the most part they seem to feel that they were really able to develop their own interests and leave Summerhill feeling equipped and ready for the wider world.

They also cite other qualities that they feel they got from being at Summerhill, which could not be reaped in the classroom, but developed out of the sense of freedom and community.

So what are these? One is confidence. I see this already in Eva, even though she has only been at Summerhill for two terms and was quite happy in her previous school. She is more relaxed in herself, which allows her to be more outgoing. Another is self-motivation. Not having been organised into endless activities by anxious adults, afraid that their children will not develop into budding violin virtuosos or become multi-lingual before their brain cells dry up or, god forbid, be bored for half an hour, their inner worlds have remained spacious and intact enough for them to know what they want out of life and what they have to offer. During my stint as houseparent I often remember hearing back from an employer or college how much they appreciated the capacity of this or that ex-pupil to creatively engage with work without needing to be told what to do all the time. Another quality that was often remarked on was that of being able to get on with people. Learning to live with people evolves naturally in the life of the community. Ex-Summerhillians, in my experience, are generally very tolerant. They do not judge people by external status symbols, such as clothes, career or wealth. They relate to people primarily as people and are not judgemental of their flaws and struggles.

**Taking on the Government**

These qualities are not ones that we can measure and award qualifications for. As such they fall outside the criteria of a good education, as laid down by the educational establishment. Education has become highly standardised, with specific goals being set for specific ages. These have to be tested for and pupils progress measured in terms of good test results. The Summerhill approach to education has not generally sat well with the government inspectors. The attitude of Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) towards Summerhill has

been akin to that of Uncle Vernon's red-faced indignation at the mention of Hogwarts School in the Harry Potter stories. Throughout Neill's career he was always fearful for Summerhill's future, citing only one inspector who ever seemed to grasp what Summerhill was actually about. During the 1990's the inspections started to become more frequent and aggressive, until eventually the school was threatened with closure if it did not bring in measures that would essentially bring an end to non-compulsory lessons.

This culminated in March 2000 in a High Court appeal in which Summerhill challenged the government's formal notice of complaint. It soon became clear that the government inspector's report was full of inaccuracies and prejudices that could not be substantiated in court. It also emerged, that despite the inspectors assurances that Summerhill was not being specifically targeted, it was on a secret list of schools 'to be watched.' The government quickly backed down and David Blunkett, the then Minister of Education, offered a set of conciliatory proposals. To quote the Times (Friday March 24th 2000): 'In extraordinary scenes at the Royal Court of Justice, the school was allowed to take over Court 40 to hold a student council to debate Mr Blunkett's new proposals.' Just like any other proposal the meeting voted on whether to accept David Blunkett's proposals. Essentially these proposals represented a complete turn around and for the first time in Summerhill's history Neill's educational philosophy came under the protection of the law. It was the end of a long campaign in which the children had been active throughout. They had taken on the British government and won.

For myself, and many others, it is a great relief that this one small school that champions children's freedom has been able to survive. This is personal – it is my daughter's school, she chose to go there and I was able to and happy to support her in this. It is also a part of my personal history: Summerhill remains for me the strongest sense of community that I have experienced in my life. But it is also the living embodiment of a way of raising children that forces us to

think about the fear-based way in which children are so often regarded: Fear that if we do not force them they will not learn. Fear that if we do not mould them they will go rotten. Fear that at our core there is a badness that needs to be made good. If there is one thing that Summerhill offers us it is that we do not need to be so afraid.

*DOSSIER*

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

**Danë Goodsman**[18]

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

**Keywords:** Big Kidness. Summerhill. Freedom.

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## Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Background

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

## Findings:

### Time served

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Progression**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Respect

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

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

## Learning to be a Big Kid

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

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

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

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

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

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

A statement in the converse:

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

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

**Pupils and Big Kids**

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

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

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

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

The Summerhillian perspective:

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

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

**Staff, Big Kidness and power relationships**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Issues for Big Kidness**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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*DOSSIER*

# ADDRESSING DIFFERENCES IN LEARNING READINESS AND STYLES

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**Abstract:** There are many different ways to think about Summerhill and A. S. Neill's philosophy of education. My intent here is not to add to the academic literature about Summerhill or Neill's ideas, but to offer some brief thoughts and ideas based on my own experiences and observations. This experience includes attending Summerhill for a year when I was a teenager and later (much to my surprise) spending my entire adult life in academia. I focus on one aspect of education that is implicit in, but possibly goes beyond, some of Neill's ideas: The differences in the ways each of us absorb and process information, particularly in an academic setting.

**Keywords:** Education. Neill. Summerhill.

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There are many different ways to think about Summerhill and A. S. Neill's philosophy of education. My intent here is not to add to the academic literature about Summerhill or Neill's ideas, but to offer some brief thoughts and ideas based on my own experiences and observations. This experience includes attending Summerhill for a year when I was a teenager and later (much to my surprise) spending my entire adult life in academia. I focus on one aspect of education that is implicit in, but possibly goes beyond, some of Neill's ideas: The differences in the ways each of us absorb and process information, particularly in an academic setting.

I am a professor at a highly prestigious university, have a doctorate in sociology and a masters degree in public health, yet the truth is that, while I love discovery and learning, I've never liked formal schooling. It was my dislike of high school that brought me in contact with Summerhill. My parents had read and were very sympathetic with the ideas in Neill's then new book "Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing." When I dropped out of high school, Summerhill seemed like a possible alternative (of my many academic accomplishments, a high school diploma is not one of them).

Why did I refuse to attend high school? To this day I'm not quite sure, though I think that I've come to understand that I was then dealing with two interacting issues. First, I had a heavy dose of teenage angst and confusion. Perhaps equally important, and I did not fully understand this until many years later, standard teaching methods, particularly lectures and structured assignments, what might be called linear learning, were inconsistent, to the point of being incompatible, with the way I learn and integrate information.

The usual description of Summerhill inevitably includes the word freedom, used positively by supporters and often negatively by detractors. Neill later clarified his original description of freedom by adding the qualifying phrase "without license," presumably to counter criticism that he was supporting and implementing ideas akin to fantasies about "noble savages." When I arrived at

Summerhill I found a vibrant democratic community, that included, somewhat to my surprise, numerous written and unwritten rules. In many ways, the social environment was more structured than I had previously experienced. It felt more like an extended family than a school.

Perhaps lost in the controversy over the meaning and scope of the term freedom as it applies to education, however, is a key, if implicit, idea: Intellectual and emotional development are not as linear or congruent as grade levels and achievement tests imply and demand. Rather, an ideal learning environment should address individual needs, talents, and desires, and be as free as possible from the restrictions that grade-level assignments and testing require. The underlying goal should be learning at a pace appropriate to a child's emotional, cognitive, and intellectual development and needs.

There is increasing recognition that children differ in the timing of their intellectual and cognitive development, and today's vastly expanded arsenal of learning environments and devices ought to equate with more opportunities for creative education that address these differences. The idea of "learning styles" has also received increasing attention, particularly with the advent of computer and web-based education. What is not apparent, however, is that these ideas have been incorporated into educational practices to address a child's readiness for learning or the recognition that some children may be, for example, "visual" and/or "auditory" learners.

It took me many years to understand that I'm a visual learner, and would rather gain information through reading and doing than by attending a lecture. For me, and I suspect many others, reading an article or book is a much better way to explore evidence and ideas, especially since it allows one to go back a few pages or jump to other sections to review related concepts and information. I would have done much better being assigned a set of books to read, checking-in occasionally with the teacher, and being examined on the subject when the teacher and I both concluded I was ready.

This is not to argue that all schools should become "Summerhills," but rather that a rethinking of the grade level and age-related achievement structure of standard education would be a step in the direction of providing a richer and more motivating educational environment for all children, including the ones, like me, who for whatever reason have a difficult time with the "standard" school environment. I know that there are tremendous struggles within the education community about how best to assure the appropriate educational advancement of all children. I would argue that the much needed emphasis that "no child [be] left behind" (which I support and interpret as a way to assure adequate education for all children, regardless of socioeconomic circumstances) should be expanded to include new ways to accommodate different styles, paces, and ways of learning.

Of course, the ideal of educating each child as an individual is generally assumed to be much more expensive than standardized methods, and it is quite possible that standard educational methods may be appropriate and adequate for the majority of students. For children who for whatever reason are not yet ready or able to benefit from the standard learning environment, however, I would hope that new and creative ways of providing education and learning environments could be made available within, or with a small addition to, current budgets. I suspect that some economies may be realized with the adoption of computer and web applications, some of which could be optimized and individualized for the way students learn.

It seems likely that students from all backgrounds and abilities would benefit by addressing different styles and ways of learning, which would augment the idea of readiness for learning, one of Neill's central contributions. Addressing the individuality of learning style would be a useful addition to help assure that all children are advancing appropriately in their knowledge and understanding of the world.

*DOSSIER*

# NEILL OF SUMMERHILL: AN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHER FOR PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

**Ronald Swartz**[24]

Submission: 01/12/2015 Review: 10/12/2015 Acceptance: 10/12/2015

**Abstract:** For those who take on the task of trying to make the ideas associated with the personal responsibility tradition a part of their lives, the work of Neill can become one place to begin to see that learning to "let people live in their own way" may at times be aided by a learning environment that is a fallible liberal democratic self-governing community. And the learning community that Neill founded nearly a hundred years ago has indeed helped to demonstrate that it is possible for many young people to get a valuable, meaningful, and worthwhile education if they are lucky enough to just "hang around" a school such as Summerhill.

**Keywords:** Education. Neill. Summerhill.

[24] Ronald Swartz received a Ph.D. from New York University in 1971 from the Department of Philosophy and History of Education. He is currently a retired former Professor of Education and Philosophy. He taught at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan from 1970 to 2011. Dr. Swartz was a full-time faculty member who was responsible for teaching classes in a variety of undergraduate and graduate programs. Swartz is the co-author of the following: Swartz, R., Perkinson, H., Edgerton, S. (1980). Knowledge and Fallibilism: Essays on Improving Education. New York, New York University Press. Swartz has published over 40 essays, articles and book chapters in a variety of educational journals including the Teachers College Record and Interchange. Swartz is also the producer and moderator for the video series Education in Multicultural Societies.

It is reasonable to support, and perhaps even encourage, the development of some elementary and secondary schools that give students the freedom to choose to go to class or stay away altogether? This question, which I call the educational problem of making academic learning optional in a school, is clearly an outgrowth of a quote from Paul Goodman's book Compulsory Mis-education. In one of his numerous attempts to explain how the educational reforms advocated by A.S. Neill differ from those endorsed by John Dewey, Goodman wrote the following:

> Like Dewey, Neill stressed free animal expression, learning by doing, and very democratic community processes (one person, one vote, enfranchising small children!). But he also assumed a principle that to Dewey did not seem important, the freedom to choose to go to class or stay away altogether. A child at Summerhill can just hang around; he'll go to class when he damned well feels like it – and some children, coming from compulsory schools, don't damned well feel like it for eight or nine months. But after a while, as the curiosity in the soul revives - and since their friends go - they give it a try (Goodman, 1965, p. 55).

The above quote makes it quite clear that those who agree with the Summerhill policy of making academic learning optional in a school would indeed provide an affirmative answer to the question, "It is reasonable to support, and perhaps even encourage, the development of some elementary and secondary schools that give students the freedom to choose to go to class or stay away altogether?" On the other hand, according to Goodman, those who follow in the tradition of Dewey do not wish to associate their educational programs with schools such as Summerhill. Nevertheless, the experimental educational program that Neill founded in 1921 has indeed become a community of individuals where freedom has been a viable aspect of a school attended by people from the ages of five to eighteen. And over the last nine decades, Neill, his first and second wives, his daughter who now runs the school, and the numerous adults and students who have been members of the Summerhill community, have indeed learned how to make an educational

program that is an interesting, challenging, and vibrant environment where worthwhile learning often takes place when people just "hang around" their school.

Before reading Goodman's Compulsory Mis-Education I had never heard of A.S. Neill or his world famous school Summerhill. However, in the fall of 1964 when I was a very disillusioned second year undergraduate student at the Urbana campus of the University of Illinois, Goodman's book was recommended to me by one of my high school friends. And for reasons that are extremely difficult to explain in this short paper, Goodman's book about how schools mis-educate students hit home to me.

That is, after reading Goodman's book I became acutely aware of the possibility that perhaps, just perhaps, I had been mis-educated since the fall of 1950 when I entered kindergarten in a rather traditional public school in Chicago, Illinois. Needless to say, most of the students and professors at my university did not want to explore the possibility that we were engaged in an educational endeavor that was mis-educative.

After reading Goodman's book I began to think about how I might incorporate some freedom for students in the classes I was attending at my university. And I now have a vague memory of raising my hand in the first class of an English course that was part of the requirements for graduation; when called upon by the professor to speak I asked him if we could discuss the required reading list with the whole class. My hope was that a few students might have suggestions about including some books or articles that were not on the required list handed out by our professor. Moreover, I made the suggestion that it might be worthwhile to consider eliminating or making a couple of the required works optional because the list created by our professor seemed a bit long for an undergraduate course.

The professor in the university class of my youth did not find much value in my attempt to provide students with a little freedom to have a say-so about

what they would read throughout the semester. After my brief request about the possibility of altering the reading list in the syllabus my professor told me in no uncertain terms that in his class the professor was the one person best qualified to decide what students should read. Furthermore, I was told that the reading list would remain as it appeared in the syllabus he had so carefully determined in light of the knowledge he had acquired over many years. And a final point to note about my first failed feeble attempt to incorporate a little freedom for students who attend universities is that after class a number of students told me that they resented the fact that I wasted classroom time with my silly idea that students should participate in the decision making process about what to include in the reading list for a college course. I was told by my fellow students that our professor was a distinguished scholar in his academic discipline who had written a number of books. As with my professor, the students made it quite clear to me that the professor was indeed the one person best qualified to determine what material we should read in class.

The traditional educational programs I attended as a student over fifty years ago assumed that there are some wise individuals who should and could determine a curriculum that all students should learn and all teachers should teach. To be sure, there was, and continues to be, much discussion about the individuals who are indeed wise enough to determine the school curriculum. But as a rule, it is usually the case that in one form or another, traditional educational programs around the world at all levels of schooling endorse a policy such as the following: Teachers, curriculum developers, professional scholars in the various academic disciplines, and other educational experts such as principals and superintendents are reliable authorities who have the wisdom to determine what is learned in school. This policy can be referred to as the policy of expert authority.

The policy of expert authority should not be viewed as a new idea. On the contrary, this policy has its historical roots in works such as Plato's Republic

and The Laws. In these works which were written well over two thousand years ago, Plato makes it quite clear that there can be some individuals who can eventually become so wise that they possess valuable knowledge or information that makes them experts who should decide what all young people should learn. The Platonic view of wisdom articulated in the Republic has indeed become the dominant view of what it means to be a wise person.

In contrast to the above view of a wise person, Socrates as he is portrayed in Plato's Apology suggests that wise people are those who know that their wisdom is worth little or nothing at all. This alternative, and uncommon view of a wise person, can be seen as opening the door for an educational policy such as the following: All school members, students included, should be given the opportunity to be personally responsible for determining their own school activities and many of the policies that govern a school. This policy can be referred to as the policy of personal responsibility.

The policy of personal responsibility can be seen as incorporating the idea that no individuals or groups of people are so wise that they should be viewed as educational experts whose knowledge is so wonderful that they do indeed know what all people should learn and do in schools. If one endorses the view that the only bit of wisdom available to an individual is that, at best, his or her wisdom is worth little or nothing at all, then it can be said that no one is so wise that he or she should decide what all people do in schools. And in many ways the policy of personal responsibility can and should be seen as an outgrowth of the Socratic insight that wise people realize that their wisdom is so inadequate that it is a mistake to think that some people are wise enough to tell others what they should do and learn.

Both the policy of expert authority and the policy of personal responsibility are ideas that have deep historical roots in the history of Western philosophy. And much that I have written here about the works of Plato is an attempt to incorporate some of the insights about Plato's works that are

suggested in Karl Popper's The Open Society and Its Enemies. Also, over the last fifty years I have come to see that in a number of ways A.S. Neill's work at Summerhill is a recent attempt to bring a Socratic way of learning and teaching to an educational program in our modern world. To be sure, Neill was not the kind of writer or educational reformer who quoted passages from famous philosophers, but near the end of his life he did note that his philosophy includes the notion that "no man is good enough, wise enough to tell another how to live." That is, for Neill:

> Philosophy means the study of what is important in life, and as we all have different interests, our philosophies are legion. That makes for universal misunderstanding. I think my own philosophy, by and large, is to let people live in their own way, and really, this sums up Summerhill. I have written again and again that no man is good enough, wise enough to tell another how to live, but I am conscious of the fact that by running a school with freedom for kids and then writing about it, I am assuming that I am trying to tell readers how to live, meaning that I am conscious of being a humbug (Neill, 1992, p. 267).

Neill was not a humbug. And his work at Summerhill and his writings need not be viewed as an attempt to tell other people how to live their lives or how to raise their children. On the contrary, as with Socrates before him, Neill knew that whatever knowledge he had acquired in his long life of nearly ninety years was not worth very much. But Neill did have the courage to make unpopular choices about how he wished to live his life and how he wanted to run a school. The result of Neill's choices can be seen as a life and a school that helped to develop a modern fallible liberal democratic self-governing educational philosophy that used a version of the policy of personal responsibility as a guiding principle for a piecemeal reform in the field of education. And Neill can be viewed as one of the outstanding twentieth century educators who made a highly significant contribution to what we can call the personal responsibility tradition in education.

Plato's works incorporate two very distinct educational traditions. These two traditions can be referred to as the expert authority tradition and the personal responsibility tradition. The first tradition includes some version of the policy of expert authority. The second tradition includes some version of the policy of personal responsibility. And over the last two thousand five hundred years the expert authority tradition has clearly come to dominate thinking about educational thought throughout the world. However, as time goes on a greater number of people may eventually come to see that in various ways it is best to develop additional educational programs that are part of the personal responsibility tradition. That is, in some distant future it may eventually be decided that parts of the personal responsibility tradition are more satisfactory than the expert authority tradition. As time goes on more and more people may eventually decide that personal responsibility schools are more satisfactory than expert authority educational programs.

To be sure, it will not be an easy task to explain that expert authority schools need to be replaced with personal responsibility schools. The task is indeed enormous and at times is likely to seem overwhelming. But for people such as Neill who make the decision to work within the personal responsibility tradition, the task has the potential to provide an individual with a worthwhile endeavor that can help a person discover that there is value in trying to live one's life in one's own way. The large educational revolution may indeed be in some distant future or it may never come about. However, the small educational revolution that can be experienced by individuals of all ages is a matter of realizing that relying on experts for one's own education may not be as satisfactory as learning that it is best to rely on oneself even if one makes mistakes and does not receive the approval of experts.

For those who take on the task of trying to make the ideas associated with the personal responsibility tradition a part of their lives, the work of Neill can become one place to begin to see that learning to "let people live in their

own way" may at times be aided by a learning environment that is a fallible liberal democratic self-governing community. And the learning community that Neill founded nearly a hundred years ago has indeed helped to demonstrate that it is possible for many young people to get a valuable, meaningful, and worthwhile education if they are lucky enough to just "hang around" a school such as Summerhill.

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# PROFOUND

**Leonard Turton**[25]

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**Abstract:** This essay is about starting a democratic school.

**Keywords:** Education. Neill. Summerhill.

[25] Summerhill democratics.

**1. Lily Marie**

A few weeks ago a former student of mine from a state school contacted me on Messenger. This is a composite of those chats:

Hey Mr. T! It's me, the one and only Lily Marie. Great news, I haven't been bitten by any dogs lately, but I still wear platform shoes.

I wanted to write to you and say thank you for being such an inspiration in my life. I talk about Club House Democracy all the time and the tools and weird things and the meetings our class did to make us all focus and become young adults.

I'm getting married in three weeks… never thought I would but I am. Jimmy Reed is my man of honour. We are still best friends to this day.

Because of being in that classroom I have achieved in many things where I didn't think I would. What we did in our class has stuck in my brain and I use the tools on a daily basis! It was especially good for classes like ours...we were rotten. We made the French teacher cry and leave. Remember ?

Ya. In the afternoons on rotary you guys terrorised teachers all the time. I always thought it was like theatre. The class simply chose whatever script they wanted to act out.

Bahaha we were bad. But Club House Democracy calmed us down and we felt like we were in charge with you ... Mini adults. It made us feel that we were important. That we mattered.

You even made Mr. Woodhouse, the vice principal, throw a fit, burst into tears and walk out of the room. That even astonished me cause you were all such great people. Ha.

You let us arrange the room so the desks were all at one side and have a library and sofa, a workshop, art space, even a small stage. Rob, Matt and I would work in the workshop but still learn and do our work...and not act out because we were bored. We had things to do. And remember the art shows?

I just thought you all needed to do that. So I checked with the principal. I said these kids are so nervous about school work I want to cancel everything for two weeks and do an Art show. So we did that conceptual art. That was a lot of fun.

You let Kelsey do art anytime she wanted.

Yes, well that seemed right. It's what she loved to do.

And anyone who got excited about reading a book could just read as much as they wanted any time at all. You said to Martin, "Just read ... never mind the Math."

Ya. He was reading the first Harry Potter book before it was famous. Funny to think that.

And we ran class meetings to run things, solve problems and make decisions. You said you would cut out as much school work as possible so we could do other stuff and projects that really interested us.

And the stool and microphone at the front for the chairperson. I loved that!

Yes, you did!

Remember the time we started a book of boring short stories and I said "I don't know about you but I think this book is awful," and asked what you all thought and the class agreed so we got rid of it.

You said, "The Math book isn't in charge of you. It can't hurt you, it can't kill you ... but you can kill it. I will show you." And you ripped the pages out of the book and threw them up in the air.

Yup. But then I said, "Please don't everyone do that or I will lose my job!"

And remember the 'Here comes the teacher game ?

Oh yes.

(I would leave the room and tell the students to yell and scream and toss stuff around and have one person at the door peeking out the window. After a few minutes I started back. The lookout yelled, "Teacher !" and the class picked everything up and got out books and pretended that they had been working quietly the whole time. I'd say, "This has got to be the best class I have ever taught. I can trust you completely.")

And we voted that each of us could decide to do spelling or not or how many math questions to do. And decided independently to do homework or not.

Yeah. That worked really well I think. Those were good ideas. Even I was impressed at the decisions people made.

We voted to have more homework one time.

You did ha ha. That was a surprise.

All those kinds of things changed my life that's for sure. Before we came to you supply teachers would walk out at recess and never come back. Ha ha ha.

Remember the class where Matt turned his desk upside down and went on strike and the teacher was screaming and he didn't care just sat on the upside down chair grinning? And Mrs. Hanson ran out of the room to me and she said " I don't know what to do. That kid is out of control." So I went to the room and said something very quietly to him like, "Matt , that's not so smart I think, " and he just tipped his desk back and sat down !

I remember it all clear as day. Rob was so hyper and you said, "Rob just stand if you want, or do flips or go over on the rug and do somersaults if you need to." And you asked us, "Is that okay?" We said yes.

And that bully Rebecca, making everyone frightened. The class finally brought her up at a meeting and we talked about it and you voted that she be sent home for two days. And after recess I said to choose two people to go to

the principal and explain what the class had decided and why. Ten minutes later Rebecca was packing her things and leaving.

It showed us that we were in control and we had a big say in making it a good place to be. She stopped most of the bullying after that.

Yes, she did.

I was dumb before coming to your class...literally. In so many ways. I learned more in your class than at high school and elementary put together. It was a big inspiration to me, and I will never forget the best times of my childhood in your classroom.

**2. Club House Democracy**

It's important to say that everything I did in that classroom had the approval of the state school principals. I never subvert. I never imply any other teachers should do what I do. I always show respect to colleagues.

Club House Democracy was something I created from my experiences in the democratic day school, Odyssey House, that I founded in Canada in 1971, after reading Summerhill at the University of British Columbia. After nine years at Odyssey House I went back to graduate school and in the 1980's taught in the state system while raising a family. (You can only do what you are able to do at various stages of your life. Never feel guilty that what you do isn't your total dream.) So, in the 80's I was the director of a Homeschool Centre in my house and at the same time started teaching at inner-city Prince of Wales. I was there for twenty years before I went to the UK and Summerhill, where for twelve years I was the Class 2 teacher, Curriculum Advisor and then Education

Manager. I left Summerhill in 2014 and am now a director of Summerhill Democratics, an NGO that helps people start democratic schools in the Summerhill style.

When I went to Prince of Wales School where Lily Marie was a student I first made sure I showed everyone that I was an accomplished teacher in any style, that I respected the school and the principal and the teachers. Most were doing their best in tough circumstances.

Once I had credibility as a professional I decided to adopt as much from Odyssey House as possible. I would talk this over with the principals. The school was generally in constant crisis so they were happy for new ideas ... anything. At times what I did didn't seem like a lot to me but to the kids there it was significant.

After a couple of years the students in my classes ran the classroom. They started the day, ended the day and I didn't need to be around. I could teach what I had to teach then go and sit in the staff room and they just carried on doing things. We changed the room ... created an appropriate habitat, I slashed curriculum to absolute essentials ... no Obsessive Compulsive Curriculum Disorder, so the students had time for themselves and their interests and projects. I allowed them a great deal of free choice of action in this clubhouse community and a say about what they learned and how they learned. Democratic meetings were introduced.

To begin with I said, " I want to ask you something. I am the teacher and I have the authority given to me by the state. I cannot give it away or I would be breaking my contract. But I can share my authority with you. Would you like

to share authority with me and work with me as partners or do you want me to continue to have all the authority?" Of course they wanted to share.

I said to them look, you think you have to go to school but you don't. You can get up in the morning and just say no. But I'm glad you don't do that because I like you all and its fun for me to be with you. But it's not easy is it? We are all stuck in this Cube invented by adults. Crammed in this cube. That is not really normal to have so many of us crammed together all day long. It's like a bad zoo. But here we are, no point in saying we aren't here. So let's work together to make it the best place to be that we possibly can. We will work together but I will stay out of your way as much as possible and cut what I teach as much as possible and we will invent good things together in the empty time and in the empty spaces we make in our Club House.

And kids who are 11 and 12 are smart and they are practical and they understand and they knew what we soon made was good. And they embraced it.

The principal was amazed at the change of behaviour. Young teachers started to come and talk to me about what I was doing. I taught them what to do. In just three years the top floor of the school, six teachers and one hundred and eighty children from nine to thirteen, were practising Club House Democracy. The superintendent was impressed. Other principals started to send teachers to see what we were doing. They came and when they saw they were amazed ... but angry. They would say, " Why don't we know this? Why did nobody teach us this?" Student teachers would come to practice in my room and they would also be angry. "None of our professors know anything about this. What is wrong with them? They are supposed to be experts. The Teacher College is 30 minutes from here."

The school became a great and happy place and a wonderful place to teach. The staff on that upper floor pledged to stay for a good long while to give the kids something stable in their lives. I had my own school, Odyssey House, before Prince of Wales, and I worked at Summerhill after. But those twenty years were, I think, the most rewarding. Bringing authority sharing and democracy to inner-city kids.

When Lily Marie wrote to me and thanked me and said that I had changed her life what she was really saying is that A.S. Neill changed her life. That a little bit of Summerhill changed her life.

So what the hell is this all about? This Summerhill.

**3. What It's All About**

I will not give you graphs, charts, statistics or scientific analysis. But I will tell you the facts of the matter. The truth of the matter. If you want to prove it to yourself you will have to go to Summerhill and see for yourself. Or to another established democratic day school, although a day school will be a different experience in many ways, not so much a village or a tribe or a family. And you cannot just visit for a day or a week. You must stay and take part for a good long time. And when you leave you will tell people the truth as well. But don't expect to be able to prove it in any conventional way because you can't document it without interfering terribly with the children and that's not allowed. This drives people crazy, and leads to doubt and disbelief. Can't do much about that I'm afraid.

Democratic education isn't, of course, new. It's a hundred years old in its present incarnation. It's not radical. It's not an experiment. It works; in boarding schools, day school and state schools. It's a proven, successful, alternative. It's not Democratic Education's fault that people don't know this. People just don't pay attention. Or don't want to because they want Control Factors to dominate.

I didn't know Neill but I know his family well. What Neill used to say, perhaps to annoy and provoke, was that children are free to choose to play or go to lessons. Lessons are, totally, optional. However, as true as this is, it's a very modest statement. What really goes on is profound.

What goes on is Freedom of Choice of Action in Democratic Community. The democratic and community are essentials ... you can't do whatever you like. You must negotiate your presence, your freedom in a community of equals and in democratic meetings. Freedom Not License is crafted by this.

Now this freedom of choice of action must also include the Gifts of Democratic Meetings and Appropriate Habitat, the Gift of the Recognition of Energies, the Gift of Time, the Gift of Adult Stepping Away, the Gift of Valuing Emotional and Social Growth as the prime values, the Gifts of Excellent Teachers and Classrooms that are neutral, of Curriculum that is kept to essentials, and the Gift of Neutrality of Lessons ... as no more or less important a choice than deep play, project play, or teen life ... or of simply being in the world. A child at Summerhill is valued because he IS.

It's not magic; it's methods and techniques and skills that create a democratic school 'curriculum'. The adults set this up, this freedom, this

democracy. It is a conscious artificial construct. You need to know what you are doing; you just can't take away state school procedures and hope for the best. You can't play hippy dreamland although in the sixties and seventies the culture and the media branded Summerhill as that. Neill was not a hippy. He was a Scot from the late nineteenth century and he knew what he was about. This democratic education ain't no fooling around.

Many adults bristle at the idea that a democratic school is created with thought and reason and specific choices. They even think that some type of total randomness means natural and free, that the successful schools flourish in a utopian vacuum that is defined by NOT BEING traditional schooling. That's dangerous nonsense.

Summerhill students do not live in an unrealistic bubble. Far from it. A student at Summerhill travels the different stages of childhood, of deep play, project play, colourful teen life, and comes to a natural timely awareness of the outer world and the requirements of that outer world after Summerhill. And excellent care is taken to make sure children receive appropriate information at appropriate times as they move from, say 13 to 17 particularly. Summerhill is a Cambridge Exam Centre and students can choose to sit state GCSE exams in order to apply for college. There are more intelligent staff meetings about the children at Summerhill than in any school I've known. As well as a Special Attention list of students of concern.

A truth is though, and this is self-evident if you work for several years in a democratic school, that children don't have to do much, if any, formal school work up to about the age of thirteen to comfortably learn what they need to learn to be successful in later lessons that lead to senior curriculum and successful exam results.

The other version of that ... relentless work, homework and testing, is a dysfunctional sham, a lie. But now is not the time to go into that.

Let's go back a bit. Just trying to answer a few objections there before they popped into your head.

At Summerhill a student is Gifted Time and with that time can freely choose her actions moment to moment. As she chooses to do and to relate, the world and the people in it react/relate back; and through this constant Free Choice of Action and resulting Reactions the child creates herself. The child creates a Personal Developmental Narrative. Writes her own story in the world. Becomes who she freely 'chooses' to be.

Let's look at what's common in traditional schools: the child's Time is controlled and his choices of action and relationship are controlled. This is done for purposes decided upon by others who are far away … by politicians, think tanks, university professors, experts, religious leaders and so on … in order to make the child into ... what? Well, perhaps an economic warrior for the state or a military warrior, a very obedient citizen, a true believer, an addicted consumer, a passive democrat … and so on. I'm not saying that everything about that is conscious, though a lot is. Let's just say I'm describing the ant hill.

Of course family and culture and media and many other things impact upon a growing human being. But not nearly as much as the daily fifteen-year long control policies of the people-product factory that is state education.

There is, of course, an understandable desire for any culture to want to sustain itself over time. But our school systems go way beyond that.

So at Summerhill, at democratic schools, children are gifted the opportunity to create themselves; in state schools someone else creates the child … into some 'other' self. Authentic vs Inauthentic. And, if you live at a democratic school you will often be able to say Satisfied vs Unsatisfied, Happy vs Unhappy, True to Self vs Alien to Self. This is observable.

When students come to a democratic school most are out of focus. That sounds mystical but it's not; they are fuzzy … even to themselves. After a while at a democratic school children come into focus ... to themselves. It can be startling to see students be surprised at becoming who they really are ... as they 'move into themselves'; as they come to 'fit themselves.' No miracle; just a fact of being left to be, and to be able to choose a Personal Developmental Narrative.

Let's look at stages of development at Summerhill. Class 1 students are about 6 to 10 years of age and although there is a two room area with lots to do (that they don't need to go to) these are the children you will see most engaged in Deep Play which, to describe simply, is typical child play both individual and group. And they do this most days all day all over the place inside and out. It's a joy to watch, and you really want to connect them to cameras and microphones to figure out what's going on, find out what the thoughts and words and interactions and games are. It's obvious what's happening is ancient and right but if you get too close … well you can't. It's like rabbits and birds. They will let you sort of approach … next they sense an alien presence … and either stop or are gone.

As Class 1 children grow older they smoothly graduate out of this stage ... although all Summerhillians, right up to graduation, are never afraid to Deep Play.

Next is Class 2, basically 10 to thirteen years of age. This is the age of Professional Childhood, of Veteran Children. Frighteningly accomplished and able to plan and organise and run meetings and take part in Project Play. They do things, make and create things ... on an increasingly sophisticated level. For some of this they need a properly set- out Activity and Learning space. Summerhill has a very sophisticated space for Veteran Children. It's filled with materials and books and computers that hits the mark of that age group. The teacher is simply a facilitator but usually not required. Veteran Children teach themselves, teach one another and are allowed to live out this end of childhood until each feels the pull of early adolescence. Summerhill respects the Professional Child. It is a critical part of development that most school systems ignore, all too often ripping 11 years olds out of the Veteran Stage and tossing them into high schools and into what is quite a destructive learning regimen. It is a world-wide tragedy. It is the Age of the Club House and needs to be honoured.

Appropriate Habitat is crucial to a democratic school. Once the control of the adult at the front of a class is removed the space itself must be able to tolerate and adapt to child life, be able to mediate the flow of energies that range from quiet to boisterous; must offer what the children require by way of doing, must be clear and have proper essential product placement. If you mess this up then the children will have a lot harder time coping, doing, learning and being together; a very badly arranged habitat will create chaos that the children will not understand at all ... it will just happen. You can't mess about if you want

a democratic school to work properly. You can fake it of course and see license and children going crazy and smile and think yes this is freedom this is Neill, this is Summerhill. It's not. Not at all.

The single school building of the Democratic Day School is much trickier to sort out ... as compared to the several buildings on a good piece of land that Summerhill offers. And if the one building was a former state school it's trickier still. For in no way is that architecture appropriate for adult withdrawal without some serious thinking and interior design.

Each building requires study and planning, taking into consideration whatever age ranges it has to accommodate. I just spent six weeks in Lithuania helping a new democratic school get started and that was a big part of our serious work.

In Lily Marie's classroom you remember the traditional interior was redesigned by myself and the children. And it changed the behaviour of the children as much as the meetings and sharing of authority

Okay … then after Class 1 and 2 comes teen life and teen socialising and hanging about and between choosing or not choosing to go to lessons often doing not much at all. That's as it should be. That's free choice teen life. It's actually very productive. Just not what adults often think should be happening. Too bad for you, adults.

Teens are in Class 3 and 4 (which is called Sign-Up) and there are subject teachers and specialised spaces and classrooms. These spaces can also be available to younger students at certain times in addition to their multi room Class 1 and 2 areas.

The school has a timetable so that children know when their lessons are or when spaces are open and for whom. Teachers are in charge of their classrooms but students can bring them up at meetings or ask for an Ombudsman if they think a teacher has abused her authority.

Summerhill is not afraid of authority. Authority is something that is given to people for particular reasons for a particular time and perhaps for a particular place. The community can always review this authority. Most community authority is regularly electable.

Summerhill is a very orderly place. Children like laws and the Summerhill Law Book has hundreds … made, refined, appealed, made again. The Law Book hangs in the dining room and students are constantly referencing it. There are laws for bed times and wake up and going down town; what you can do where and when; when and where you can be noisy or have to be quiet. If you can think of something that people can have serious differences about the school has probably discussed it in a meeting … and the meeting may have created a law.

There is also a tribal range of ages. There are child elders, the Carriage Kids and other older students, who bring the weight of experienced common sense to the impulsive enthusiasms of younger students. "No, the law says you cannot have a knife. You are not old enough." "No, you cannot go downtown with Erik, he's only a House Kid." And so on.

The school meeting is the heart, the engine room of a democratic school community. One person one vote.

If you spend time at Summerhill you will observe that it is naturally orderly, naturally law abiding … adults need not be around to make this happen. Young and old are honestly respectful of one another. There is little artifice; there is no fear.

Returning to Appropriate Habitat: Summerhill has eleven acres of lawn and woods and about fourteen different modest buildings. You generally only see the iconic Victorian main house in pictures. Children have their own living spaces, the lounge, the Woodwork that's always open, libraries, the dining room, Houseparent areas and so on. Classrooms are only one option (And you can access most classrooms and not do lessons). Everything is an option unless there is a law about it.

Although the spaces combine to create a complete child-village environment it is not crammed with endless diversion. Summerhill children are given the Right to Boredom. They have time, they have space and places to go to but they often get bored and that is allowed. Adults feel no need to solve that problem. Boredom is good for figuring yourself out and for creativity and for contemplating that interesting emptiness that comes upon you when you have finished something and aren't sure what's next.

The Gift of Adult Stepping Away connects very closely with Free Choice of Action. I once saw an adult greet students arriving at a democratic school and soon he was leading a game with about fifteen children. This bothered me. When I was at a new school in Lithuania I had to impress upon the very

enthusiastic adults to get out of the way, to leave the children alone. To let them be themselves and let them feel power and that the place was theirs as much as anyone else's. I said, "Don't care so much about the children. Just care about giving them a good democratic school environment. You must not need children, or need the energy of children. You have to be independent of children and their attention and let them be independent of you." If you live only to see the shining light of learning in a child's eyes … better avoid a democratic school. You have no right to demand that or to manipulate it to make it happen.

Some new teachers at Summerhill start to act like Camp Counsellors … or edu-tainers. This is not good and they are advised about it. Adults are not at Summerhill to be the centre of attention, even with all the best-of-caring intentions. Teachers at a democratic school can have a lot more influence on children than state school teachers because the relationship is closer; one student wanted to change classes and go to a different language teacher. She said, "The way K teaches just doesn't work for me." I said, "Okay that's fine." The girl burst into tears and replied, "But I don't want to hurt K's feelings. He is a good teacher, just not for me." This was soon resolved and the student changed classes. K, of course, did not mind at all.

Free Choice of Action depends on the Gift of Emptiness. This is essential. Freedom is the right and the ability to move outward with self, and to move outward requires emptiness to move into. Empty time to fill; emptiness of habitat … which is a habitat that does not impose itself upon you but is there for you and waits, Appropriately; empty of adults unless you ask for them; empty of adults who need to teach or lead; emptiness of curriculum … a curriculum that you can access but that does not force itself upon you, and that

is not full of the unnecessary; empty of imposed authority … that is replaced with democratic authority.

The environment and the mechanics of a democratic school is there but not there. It should be primarily invisible to the child so that the child can act and feel free … to create himself.

But no mistake … be of no doubt … Summerhill adults are ultimately responsible for everyone. Not all laws are made by the children. The structure of every successful democratic school includes a compassionate, wise, and experienced group of staff that ensure a safe and secure experience for every child

**4. Village /Family**

(Excerpt from Unerzogen, 2010)

When I wake up in the morning at Summerhill I go outside to 90 people I know. I don't know them all in the same way or to the same degree and my relationship with each will change over time but I know them and they know me. And I meet with them in meetings to discuss village life and village problems. And we vote on issues as equals. It is an unrelated extended family, with older and younger brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, parent-like and grandparent-like figures. The children do not substitute for blood relations, but embrace an even bigger set of close relationships that mirror family life. The Summerhill Village redefines what family can be… perhaps should be in a healthier world. Perhaps once was.

I am Canadian, and boarding schools are alien to Canada. I am not of the opinion that families are necessarily damaging or that children should not live

at home with their own families. However, it does appear, in the context of Summerhill, of freedom of choice in democratic community, of numbers in the 80 to 100 range, in a village like setting, that children live very happily in non-related extended-family groups, and thrive on the multiple interactions and friendships formed in freedom. There is simply nothing cultish or manipulative about it. It appears, perhaps to the distress of those who hold dear the nuclear family, to be very natural. Children appear to thrive in a small village, or a small tribe. To be happier.

M said at lunch today, "Yeah, I wish I could stay here over the holidays. I have a good family and I love them, but I'd rather be at Summerhill." What I think M means is that she understands and appreciates the value of living in a deeply connected environment; instead of in a world that is all too often fractured and fragmented.

**5. Start a Democratic School**

So don't wait and longer. Start a Democratic School

*DOSSIER*

# SUMMERHILL: SEEDS OF DEMOCRACY IN CANADA

**Deb O'Rourke**[26]

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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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*DOSSIER*

# NEILL: FROM GRETNA GREEN CREED TO SUMMERHILL EXPERIENCE[27]

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**Abstract:** Assuming that the diaries reflect the thinking of teachers, it has been identified in A Domine Log dilemmas from which Alexander S. Neill built his pedagogic creed, in 1915. After demonstrating how this creed was consolidated, up to the establishment of Summerhill school in 1924, this paper is concluded by raising questions considering the need to study ways to take to the elementary public school systems innovations and practices based in Summerhill.

**Keywords:** Neill. Summerhill. Teacher's journals. Self-training.

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## Introduction

A common finding in studies of the teaching profession is that teacher performance is influenced by the early years of education, considered from the earliest school experiences, to the academic education itself for the profession. These experiences have an impact on the professional identity often leading to the reproduction of ways of conceiving the act of teaching and build teaching. Findings about professional development disseminated mainly in the last decades of the twentieth century shows that, when placed in situations that require the reading and reflection on your way to work, professionals tend to revise their beliefs and evaluate its performance by making changes in their way of acting, adding new elements, principles and values to their practice. Under these influences, personal changes take place in different directions (Pineau, 1985; Kaddouri, 1996; Fond-Harmant, 1995).

Based on studies on the relationship between professional identity and education processes, Neill's story was investigated in a research, which, without privileging institutionalized education and not intending to proclaim the self-teaching, was organized around the assumption that subjects form themselves from the opportunities and limitations that life circumstances provide them, using formal and informal learning situations. The study had as main objective to identify how a group of teachers effectively exercising in elementary schools and three distinguished educators used self-training processes throughout their working life as part of a strategy to change and build yourself in a certain direction (Santana, 2006).

Analysis on Neill's story revealed a fragmented school education, childhood and youth school failure and early introduction into working.

At 14, due to the learning difficulties, becomes, by its family's decision, a teacher apprentice under his father's guidance, at the school where he had studied. Since then, at that and others schools for which he had been designated, performs its activities without involvement with teaching. As a

result, devalues the profession. Search movements of knowledge that he carries after his teacher's apprentice period, are not directly pointed to improve teaching practice, but aim to add his way of being competencies related to life in society - wants to learn to dance, to behave in social circles, to appreciate classical music and master the content required to take the exams, which, in his homeland, were requirements to advance in teacher's career. In 1908, when he decides to take a college course, moves away from teaching, a resolution that results from the way he was introduced in teacher activity and life experiences in his 10 years of career prior to his entry into university. The withdrawal in his career remained until his departure to Gretna Green in 1914, when he comes back to teach, against his will, due to war, which moves him away from journalism activities undertaken after graduate[29] . Only then he strives to build a way of being a teacher that culminates with the installation of Summerhill School in 1924[30] , at England.

The movements performed by Neill, between 1914 and 1924, to learn about teaching and education can be interpreted according to the view that the return to formal and informal studies in a self-directed search formation is an intention to restructure the underlying existence to which it is a logical disruption or identity conversion (Fond-Harmant, 1995). Experiencing a trajectory marked by conversion logic, individuals seek to reaffirm or perfect

[29] Gretna Green is a city in Scotland, country where Neill was born in 1883 and lived until 1912 when traveling to London as a journalist.

[30] The international school established in 1921 in Germany, with partners Otto Neustatter, and his wife, Frau Doktor, it is a precursor of Summerhill but does not correspond to the proposal Neill puts into practice later. Under the title *The origin of Summerhill*, Neill refers to the partners influence in the school organization and the limits that restrict their activities. When, in 1923, the revolution in Saxony breaks out, travels to the mountains of Tyrol, Austria, only with students of the division under his responsibility until 1924 ends, then leads these students to England and rents a house called Summerhill. It is then that the school is being built under the influence of his defended ideas (Neill, 1976, p.115-122).

identity traits, while in experienced trajectories according to a logic disruption occurs denial of previously assumed traits[31] .

In Neill's autobiography, as demonstrated by Santana (2007, p. 213-235), it is evident that he develops a perspective of searching knowledge and professional experiences of free choice, from 1914 until about 1924, when he goes to Summerhill. Occurs through this period a history of self-training, predominantly focused on building a progressive teacher profile. From this path emerges a pedagogic creed that is already fully outlined in the book *A Domine Log,* published in 1915, and which was consolidated through the various experiences lived by the year 1924.

From the experience lived in Gretna Green, determined to establish himself as a teacher, Neill has undertaken a biographical trajectory that is inscribed on a conversion logic through which sought to legitimize a position in a social space and professional already attended years ago. At that time in his life he did not undertake a break trajectory with the teaching profession previously assumed. Early on this path in 1915, when writing of *A Domine Log,* makes an explanation of values, principles and forms of action in the field of education. During the work, seeks to justify the assumed or explicit positions, signals the abandonment of practices learned and internalized under the influence of his father, who was his teacher and the trainer who initiated him in teaching. The reflection which occurs through this diary has continued at different times and biographical events experienced between 1914 and 1924 by which Neill had the opportunity to reaffirm and consolidate his positions and justifications. Over those 10 years, is legitimated as having a distinct professional profile in relation to the dominant among those considered traditional teachers.

[31] The main sources of study for Neill self-formation process were: the autobiographical book *Neill! Neill! Orange peel!*, published in 1976, the Spanish translation of *Neill, Neill, orange peel*, originally published in English in 1972; and the book *El nuevo Summerhill*, 1994, a compilation made by Albert Lamb of texts written by Neill.

That did not take place without conflicts, without recognizing that there were different ways of designing and making education and teaching, and to make choices between different paths. Similar situations experienced by Neill happens in different ways in the life of every teacher and are not always records of experienced change process for the teacher himself or others to access further.

In this article, on the premise that the diaries are a source to investigate teachers' thoughts, the book *A Domine Log,* written by Neill, was examined to identify the dilemmas from which he chose paths and decisions to build his pedagogical creed in 1915. Using others Neill's writings, it also holds a brief analysis to see how these paths and decisions were consolidated in self-training path followed by the installation of Summerhill in 1924. As a conclusion it raises some questions considering the need to bring, to elementary public schools, discoveries, innovations and principles which contribute to its administrative and educational functioning.

## The book "A Domine Log": source to meet the construction process of Neill pedagogical creed

This is a book narrated in first person, with multiple references to the context of the small Gretna Green, portrayed as an isolated village without relations with the outside world.

Early in the English edition, in a dedication addressed to his father, Neill says how happy were the kids from the school that served as reference for writing the log, under his regency and direction. An evidence of how much he was still marked by the traumatic experiences of student and teacher apprentice in the school directed by his father and how many reflections on the practices experienced in the past were present in the book.

Among the reasons for the book's production it is necessary to consider what says Neill:

> I started writing this log to discover my philosophy of education, and I'm finding myself. Discover our self is the most important. Personality matters a lot in education. How far will I be a danger to my students? Will not I be influencing them too much? (Neill, 1976, p 282)[32].

Despite this statement, it is possible to conjecture about the existence of additional reasons not directly spelled out in the book, for example, when the author states that, fearing the possibility to limit their horizons to local habits of Gretna Green, decides to "write books do not go crazy "(Neill, 1976, p. 94) and at the same time, seeks to maintain contact with the world reading the New Age and the Nation newspapers, received weekly by mail. To these observations adds on the same page:

> Flit of Fleet Street [very busy London street and where were concentrated facilities of the major newspapers at the time] to a quiet village in Scotland required some adaptation. I was put in a small hut. When my landlady took the lamp at night and lowered the shutters of the small window I felt isolated from all over the world. It seems ridiculous that a man known as an education heretic has taken his profession just because he failed as a journalist and because he did not dare to enter the army.

It is clear that the writing also corresponded to the need to fill the nostalgic void that takes place when the author, used to a city life in London, is forced to live in a small town without the amenities and attractions, daytime and evening, of a big city.

In view of the circumstances surrounding the book and whereas one who writes always addresses an interlocutor, sometimes imaginary, raises questions like: To whom was Neill addressing? Himself? Other teachers? As a log produced step by step, in the course of his stay in Gretna Green as **a** teacher

[32] The version of the book A Domine Log used for writing this article is in Chapter V, page 264-337, of the book: NEILL, A.S. *Autobiografía. Neill! Neill! Orange peel*!, 1st. ed. in Spanish. Translation by Carlos Valdes Vazquez. Mexico / Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica 1976.

and director of a small school, it is correct **to** imagine that to write it, the author converses with himself. However, Neill had a career as editor of a college newspaper, and later played with satisfaction the role of journalist.

From his experience as an editor at the *The Student* and as *The Glasgow Herald* contributor, when he was 28 years, and an English Language Course student, Neill concluded: "Journalism was my future" (Neill, 1976, p 88.). Working field in which he seeks employment leaving university. Then goes to work in Scotland and later in London, editing an encyclopedia. Also writes the language, literature and mathematics sections and *Popular-Educator* reference book design. After that, still in London, works at *Picadilly Magazine,* whose publication scheduled for August 1914 was interrupted by the outbreak of war in July of that year.

On arrival at Gretna Green considered himself more a journalist than a teacher, hence the assumption that intended to give publicity to what he wrote, while already writing the log.

*A Domine Log* does not bring texts dated to identify how the narrated events took place in time, its structure indicates that the author did not use a driving plan in writing, various issues raised are addressed in a fragmented way, many of them taken in different sections. In view of Viñao (2004, p. 344), discontinuity and fragmentation in such texts are indications that the book was not subject to review after its original writing. That is, the book corresponds to the report prepared by Neill in the period he lived in Gretna Green and he says: " I write in a way similar to how I teach: going a topic to another without any order." (Neill, 1976, p. 331).

The fact is that the book in question is a personal document, a free production, made without the intervention of an investigator, someone who sought to direct or guide the author's reflection. One could say that it was the flow of daily events of his activity as a teacher and as a subject inserted into the social context of the small Gretna Green, reflections that fomented and led to

writing. The text, therefore, combines descriptions of how the teacher drove school activities, children's reactions to what was proposed to them, observed events in the community, references to the conduct of its inhabitants and the local characteristic human types, digressions on Neill's ideas, feelings and beliefs about education, teaching, society. Presents a descriptive component, recording details of classroom situations plus a significant and self-significant component to highlight features and reactions of students and character traits, skills, feelings, concerns and aspirations of the author himself[33] .

The students, the community and himself are the axes from which the author delimits positions and builds a creed, a very particular educational philosophy, which later was being tested and at the same time, consolidating itself in the exercise activities related to teaching and education, until taking the form of Summerhill school.

The log is a book intensely marked by Neill's life circumstances at the time that there was a retreat from the lifestyle experienced in previous years, when he lived in London, working as a journalist and with a busy social life. Contact with a way to be a teacher and a reflection on this way was facilitated by circumstances such as the bucolic aspect of Gretna Green, at that time; the state of war in which the world was; the return to the teaching situation after a long break; and the interim of the situation as a teacher and substitute principal. Moreover, the autonomy, due to the fact of being your own principal, the friendly relations established with those responsible for the inspection and the recognition that "to the School Staff it did not matter what he[...] done" (Neill, 1976 p. 95) resulted in freedom to try different teaching ways. The truth is that circumstances conspired to foster reflection on introduced innovations

[33] Zabalza (1994, p 110-111) distinguishes three types of diary to discuss the role of this instrument in the research of teacher's thoughts: diary as a structural class organizer in which the teacher specifies how he organized activities, using it as programming tool; diaries that describe the tasks performed with emphasis on dynamic teaching and diaries self-expressive that emphasize personal aspects to express the characteristics of the students and the teachers themselves.

and transgressions put in place with regard to the official standards and educational tradition.

Finally, the log is a testimony book of reflectivity moments lived by the author and its marked by his writing style and a distinctive type of humor that he cultivated.

**Neill dilemmas in 1914, and the paths chosen**

In *A Domine Log,* Neill records his dilemmas, dealing with "bipolar or multipolar situations that are presented to the teacher in the course of their professional activity" (Zabalza, 1994, p.61). Studies that analyze this aspect of the teaching profession believes that, when facing problematic situations that require decision-making, the teacher chooses to put himself in one of the poles which lies in the possibility of solving the problem.

The log presents problematic situations that require immediate decisions and shapes the deal with the daily life of the classroom, including questions relating to class control, the rules of student's behavior and the conduct of teaching certain content. It also presents the dialogues that the author had with himself and with other partners - fellow teachers and inspectors - about the most general terms that define a philosophy of education and refer to dilemmas related to problems and other broader questions, not directly related to the immediate classroom context. In this case, lays the reflections that give rise to questions about the inclusion or absence of certain subjects in the curriculum, teaching goals and education for children at the stage of elementary school in a country community, relations between social classes and the school's role clarifying the students about these relationships. Dilemmas that require immediate decisions, reflects in the teacher everyday action in the classroom. Others configures a philosophy, a way of thinking about teaching and education, when effectively internalized, can be reflected in the way of

planning activities, in the way to put yourself on the official proposals and how to lead the classroom activities.

The book holds different issues that affect the operation of a school. It recurs addressing issues relating to the control of discipline, including aspects related to students' autonomy, methods put in practice to regulate life in school and maintaining the necessary climate to ensure interaction between students, themselves and their teachers. In all the passages holding this issue, is noticeable the existence of the dilemma: imposed discipline versus self-discipline, in other words, imposed management centered on the teacher versus self-management. Dilemmas that teachers and school managers continue to face until now.

Early in the book (Neill, 1976, p. 268), there is a record of a physical punishment that the teacher carries to a student as penalty, adopting a coherent attitude with the norms and standards still in force at the time, but Neill, at the time of its history, considers reprehensible. The conducive conditions to a strange reaction to the practices that have always been present in his training as a teacher's apprentice and in his teaching career, were possibly created by his contact with new ideas in university and as an editor and writer at newspapers and magazines, through his period of absence of educational activities.

Amid the constant references to discipline, describes classroom incidents that give teachers the opportunity to apply punishments and to look into these attitudes to question the reasons for their actions and conjecture over children's reactions. Dilemmas regarding discipline gain visibility when the author confronts his way of being and conceiving a teacher-student relationship with the expectations of local community, parents and educational authorities regarding the requirement of strict discipline in school.

When talking about the inconvenience of the imposed discipline and strict obedience without understanding the reason for the proposed standards, highlights beliefs that will guide practice in the school of Gretna Green and in his future activities, as suggested by statements: "I believe in discipline but the

one that the individual imposes himself "(p 267.); "I do not like strict discipline because I believe that the child should have as much freedom as possible. I wish that children have to be human as I also have to "(p. 266).

From reflection on discipline comes experimentation procedures based on beliefs and self-management practices, that seem to consolidate over the writing period of the log. And at the root of self-management practices that he adopts is the belief in the need to inculcate in children a community spirit, in other words, "we must teach children that others also have rights [...] We all have the right to live our lives, but we must do it in harmony with the community" (p. 269).

Addressing the curriculum theme, Neill blends critics about the official imposition with positions on the importance of some curricula, considering especially the country characteristic of the school where he taught. The emergence of conflicts related to the acceptance versus rejection of the official guidelines on curriculum is visible. Throughout development of the entire book are present dilemmas about what to teach jointed dilemmas on teaching goals and education. I.e. along the log, Neill found himself in situations that forced him to reflect on why to teach or that evoked memories of these issues.

In Chapter I, a statement on the main objective to be achieved with his work already points to the positions taken on the role of content in school.

> I want my students to understand what it means life [...]. Yes, I want to teach them, or rather help them to find an attitude. Most of what I teach, they will forget in a year or two, but one attitude is preserved for life. I wish these guys and these girls acquire the habit of seeing life honorably (Neill, 1976, p. 265).

His thinking about what and how to teach becomes more clear when, on page 290, states: "I try to form minds that ask, destroy and rebuild." Proposes an incidental teaching, taking as a start point what happened occasionally in classroom, in the community and outside of Gretna Green using, for example, newspapers as a teaching resource. These are innovative initiatives at a time

when the norm was strictly follow the prescribed sequence content in educational programs, give lectures and use the textbook as the main or only recourse.

Reacts to the status granted to the observation in the teaching of natural sciences emphasizing that this teaching tool makes sense only if accompanied by imagination.

On the teaching of history, criticizes the textbooks based on stories of kings and queens who do not teach to think and passing a false impression of events and people. Therefore, "it is useless, what matters is the story of people and their gradual progress from slavery to heavy work" (p. 273).

Against the thought of the inspector who believes he is writing a practical science, Neill says that writing is "an art like drawing [...] Does the style matter? Art that sets the style is what makes writing good "(p. 275). Spelling and grammatical errors matter little. Proposed themes for redaction should stimulate the imagination, so that he usually starts a writing activity telling students: "Suppose you slept a thousand years, tell what happened after waking up" (p 297.). These points represent choices made around the dilemma: traditional teaching of writing and grammar versus a renewed education.

He describes the experiences that performs in the classroom when proposing free drawing and drives teaching in a coordinated manner with his personal experience in relation to this curriculum content (p. 275).

He declares himself against the presence of religion in the school curriculum and believes that sex education should be taught in school, so that students learn that sex is a normal fact of life (p. 286). He shows his sympathy for mixed classes where boys and girls learn the interdependence between genres and make many other observations about the curriculum, including those related to topics discussed in class: feminism, men relationship, worker exploitation, newspapers as ideologies disseminators, etc.

And at the end of the book (p. 336), reveals:

> Mary's father is right: my school turned into a playing field, and I'm glad of it. These boys have enjoyed a year of happiness and freedom. They did what they wanted; sang while working in his writings, ate candy while reading his books, threw themselves in my arms when wandering in search of beautiful landscapes.

The results were not only freedom and child's joy. The log reveals an experimentation of ways to teach certain content regarding interests and characteristics of children, and the need that every teacher feels to coordinate what and how he teaches with his way of being and seeing the world. With the completion of activities outside the classroom, there was an expansion of the concept of learning spaces, clearly when Neill says:

> My students remain in the field all day. The class takes his books, goes and rests in the hills. When I want them to come, I call them with the bugle. Each group has a curfew and quickly returns when hearing it (p. 301).

While the older students were in the field, the teacher taught to children who were not allowed to go alone to that space. Outdoor drawing activities were also held on certain days of the week. The test of self-management practices is evident in the statement:

> I do not force any child to learn in my school. The few who do not like books and classes can leave their seats when I'm teaching. Those who flee at the duty are not always the most ignorant (p. 301).

There were also tested new forms of relationship between teacher and student in an attempt to pass to the child the image of a human teacher, who has feelings and tastes, enjoy pleasure, cultivate forms of leisure and distances himself of the authoritarian teacher figure, one that is too far from the child.

On the last page of the log, an evaluation of his time as a teacher in Gretna Green:

> I'll be honest to a certain point and finish my log solemnly declaring I believe I have done a fine job. As for the work expected of me by the Department of Education in Scotland ... Well, my last entry in the official diary is a good sample: The school closed today because summer holidays began. I received my discharge from the Department (Neill, 1976, p. 337).

## Consolidation of the creed: from the experiences on the early 20s to Summerhill in 1924

After Gretna Green and a brief time as military in World War I, Neill works at private institutions, in tune with the renewal of teaching proposals. He meets Homer Lane and his community of young offenders which he directed adopting principles of self-management. He was hired to work at King Alfred School by John Russell, a progressive educator, and there performs a self-management experience that was unsuccessful. Undergoing analysis sessions with Homer Lane, he was enchanted by the analyst because "what he told me about freedom was the gospel that I was seeking, was the scientific basis of vague yearnings that had shown in my A Domine Log "(p. 108).

At this time, Neill conceives the analysis as an important resource for children education and begins to formulate his assumptions about the need to consider sexual impulses in children's education.

Later around 1921, along with Beatrice Ensor, he becomes an editor of the journal *Education for The New Era*, the English edition of the World New Education journal own by the New Education Fellowship created by Beatrice and Ferrière. In the French edition called Pour L'Ere Nouvelle, it was constant the presence of articles on Progressive School, self-management, co - education, active school, Decroly, Montessori, Ferrière and others. The first issue of the journal in 1922 records that was proposed by the New Education Fellowship, an education for development of spirit supremacy making The child aware of human dignity. The fellowship defended as principles: respect for children individuality, their innate interests, freely expressed through manual, intellectual, aesthetic, social activities and others;

personal and collective discipline organized by children themselves in order to strengthen the sense of individual and social responsibility; replacing competition for cooperation, teaching the children to put their subjectivity working in community; coeducation learned as instruction and common education with collaboration between the two genres in order to exercise salutary influence on each other[34].

Due to the relationship with Beatrice Ensor, an important member of the Theosophical Society and the England educational environment, Neill participates at Calais in the first International Congress of New Education, organized by Ferrière; speaks at a conference in Salzburg, Austria; goes to Germany where he creates with other partners in Hellerau an international school that remains working in the country from 1921 until 1923, when the revolution in Saxony breaks out and he departs taking his students, first to Austria and then to Summerhill in England.

The period of 1918 until early 20s, accounted for Neill an expansion of horizons that certainly contributed to consolidation of the creed built in Gretna Green. Consolidation that occurred, either by incorporating new elements such as the concept of freedom inspired by Homer Lane, either by a fierce adherence to previously built principles, fueled by battles fought to fend off less extremist ideas than his on renewal of education. Although in Gretna Green's creed there were already glimpses of principles defended by the New Education Fellowship, some of these principles appear more clearly and with more striking emphasis later in the descriptions of Neill on the education proposal practiced at Summerhill.

[34] Principles taken from the number 1 *POUR L 'ERE NOUVELLE,* French edition of the World New Education Fellowship journal, edited by Ferrière and published in January 1922, available at http://www.unicaen.fr/recherche/mrsh / pen . Access 22 dez.2015. The various numbers of *The New Era,* English edition of the Fellowship journal edited by Neill along with Beatrice Ensor, are at the Institute of Education, University of London and are not available for electronic consultation.

The fact is that ideas concretely practiced and defended in Summerhill are consistent with the creed formulated in 1915, and remain so until the twenty-first century.

**What questions should be asked on Summerhill in the XXI century?**

Former students, visitors and Neill reports, describe Summerhill as a school that runs as an internship and coeducation school, located in large playgrounds favorable to recreation, where autonomy was encouraged in order for the students to be themselves and evolve according to their interests. In this school they were free to choose subjects to study and handcrafts they want to experience; classes are not mandatory, each child decide when to attend them; formation of character and personality matter more than learning content. The school has a proposal for self-management to be effective through a weekly meeting held on Saturdays, which involved teachers, principals, staff and students of all ages. Through this mechanism it takes place the construction of standards to rule school community and judgment of infractions while each member's vote has equal weight, since all have equal rights[35].

There are many questions that a greater knowledge of Summerhill experience raises, especially when associating its birth with its creator's history of life and formation.

The first questions raised here relate to the experience permanence. With so many educational innovations, public and private, which were short-lived or had lost identity, how to explain that Summerhill proposition remained to this day with the same characteristics? What factors contributed to the continuity of experience and fidelity to the original proposal?

Summerhill is a private school that has always worked for a small number of students. In 1949 there were only seventy students between 4 and 16 years; in 2007 it worked with 78 students between 5 and 17 years. It is broad knowledge

[35] See text by Zoe Readhead, Neill's daughter, titled *Summerhill today,* in Vaughan (2011).

the difficulty of replicating Neill experience in major primary and secondary public schools currently in our country. Despite the impossibility of full reproduction, innovations and discoveries that occurred there may in some way contribute to enlighten dilemmas that still persist in the administrative and pedagogical management of public schools. Therefore, raises the question: what reinterpretation of Summerhill experience is necessary for discovering principles, criteria, strategies and practices applicable to public education? This is not to seek a transplant; the key is to find inspiration to transform or adapt practices.

Neill always refused to seek theoretical explanations for the principles and practices adopted in Summerhill, his writings on the experience reported characteristics of the work at school, justifying them in a very personal way. In addition to the restrictions outlined in the official inspection reports carried out at school, critics like Saffange (1995) point out weaknesses and believe that the principles on which the school was built and ran and its results lack analysis and solid justification. These considerations lead to the question in what principles of educational theories developed in recent decades, Summerhill could be considered? And who will do this?

The testimony of Zoe Readhead, school's current principal, point out that, in recent years, it has been through some changes and adjustments to reality. Nothing yet that matches a systematization involving the whole proposal, removing itself from the status of an intuitive conception to be put as an educational proposal, whose original principles resonate totally or partially on theoretical assumptions currently present in the field of education and related areas. Without this "Summerhill was and will remain for a long time a mythical place where once was born a world of love and harmony" (Saffange 1999, p.10).

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*DOSSIER*

# THE LEGACY OF A.S. NEILL IN FINLAND

**Antu Sorainen**[36]

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**Abstract:** This article looks first briefly on the history of education and the influence of A.S. Neill's ideas in Finland, and then turns into a roundtable where three people – two mothers and one son – discuss their own experiences of the Summerhillian kindergarten in Finland, and the future of alternative education in the era of neo-liberalism.

**Keywords:** Neill. Summerhill. History of education.

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## The Legacy of A.S. Neill in Finland

This article looks first briefly on the history of education and the influence of A.S. Neill's ideas in Finland, and then turns into a roundtable where three people – two mothers and one son – discuss their own experiences of the Summerhillian kindergarten in Finland, and the future of alternative education in the era of neo-liberalism.

The discussants in the roundtable are:

- Sirkka Ahonen, born 1939, Professor Emerita at the University of Helsinki, Department of Teacher Education. She has a long research history on educational beliefs, being a recognised scholar of the history of pedagogy in Finland and beyond. Sirkka experienced personally some of the Summerhillian experimentations in Finland as an academic and "alternative" mother of one in the early 1970s.
- Leena Eräsaari, born in 1948, Professor Emerita in Social Work at the University of Jyväskylä, and mother of Matti. She has theorized on the architecture of bureaucratic places and is widely known for her radical ideas on how to re-organize hierarchies on social work sites. She has intergenerational experience of A.S. Neill's concretized ideas in Finland as her two children and three grandchildren were in Lastenpaikka (Children's Place), the early Summerhillian kindergarten in Finland. Leena was somewhat active in the parents' group that gathered there. Her daughter Jenny was born in 1970, her granddaughter Aada in 1995 (as well as Aada's twin brother Eskil), and grandson Otso in 1997.
- Matti Eräsaari, born 1975, is the son of Leena. Matti was in Lastenpaikka for a short period as a kid. He holds a PhD in anthropology, and works at the University of Manchester as a Newton Research Fellow.
- Antu Sorainen, born 1963, is a Docent and Academy of Finland Research Fellow at the University of Helsinki. She is the moderator and translator

of the discussion. She was never in kindergarten as her mother was a stay-home mother of four. Antu thinks that this early childhood history influenced her (anti)social skills and her quest for personal autonomy in her later life. Therefore, she is interested in concrete utopias and the conceptual changes in pedagogy and education.

## Introduction: Experimental Education and the Modernizing State in Finland

Finland is a liberal and democratic country, which has invested in education as a national strategy. A country proud of its leading PISA results, Finland is a good example of the educational success of the democratic welfare education systems. The Nordic pedagogy ideologies developed in the course of profound socio-political discussions in the 19th and early 20th centuries. There was always space for *the utopian* in the Nordic education sphere, especially at times of larger societal changes. While Nordic countries each have their own pedagogical histories, the comprehensive school that offers 10 years obligatory, free of charge education for all children was one shared major utopia materialised.

In Finland, A.S. Neill's ideas were actualized in concrete way only in the 1960s. The decade of the 1960s was of a particular national importance in many ways: a deliberate shift in governmental politics from an agrarian society to a modern state took place at that time, and rapid urbanization and democratization processes were changing the country in a profound way.

A group of liberal and leftist intellectuals worked tirelessly throughout the late 1950s and 1960s to modernize the course of Finnish education, legislation, economics and the social policy system. The notion of comprehensive schooling had already been seriously discussed after the war, and it become more common for children to go to middle and upper secondary general school in the 1950s. From the 1960s also the tertiary level education

expanded rapidly as families got wealthier and wanted a better education for their children. The major after-war challenge in Finland was to fit all the children in the large age groups into primary schools. Finally, as a result of a political debate, experimentation with the comprehensive school began in the late 1960s. It aimed at guaranteeing a primary school education to all children. A law on the basis education system was enacted in 1968. It introduced a 9-year universally free municipal comprehensive school, and was implemented from 1972, starting from the north of the country working south, and completed finally in Helsinki in 1977.[37]

In this situation, Summerhill offered some testing ground ideas for the developing comprehensive school in the late 1960s Finland. Some of the educators who were originally involved in the creation of the comprehensive democratic school system in Finland in the 1960s were also interested in A.S. Neill's ideas. For example, *Erkki Aho,* Head of the School Ministry from 1973 to 1991, and the main ideologist of the comprehensive school, attended at the inaugural meeting of the Free Experimental School Association in 1969 in Helsinki. Further, a wide array of psychiatrists, MPs, psychologists, journalists, professors, artists, theologians and university students participated in this meeting, which was moderated by a well-known politician and feminist activist, *Marianne Laxén*. In the meeting, it was decided that A.S. Neill was invited to become a support member of the advisory board as the original idea of the Association was to establish a Finnish Summerhill School.

During the tumultuous period that marked the implementation of the comprehensive school system, it did not, however, appear to be an appropriately democratic project. However, it still made sense to create a Summerhillian kindergarten, which could later be transformed into a school. Hence, *Lastenpaikka* (Children's Place) was opened in 1970. It was perceived to

[37] The current law sets a statutory school age, covering the age groups 7 to 16, from which a person cannot be freed from it.

work as an experimental site that could work as the basis for creating and testing ideas to feed the evolving Finnish preschool system.

**Finnish Specifics – How Summerhill Fits the German Idealist Tradition?**

**Antu Sorainen:** Until the mid-20th century, the Finnish education discourse was deeply affected by the German idealistic tradition. The ideology of comprehensive schooling was first debated in Finland in the late-19th century, when two principal ideas about the content of this new concept were in competition. The first line of thought underlined the concept of *Sittlichkeit,* originating in Hegel's philosophy. It refers – roughly put – to the habits of the nation combined with the political courage to make judgment when needed. The Finnish national philosopher, J.V. Snellman, was the advocate of this first line. For him, education was never universal but always aimed at raising a specific historical person – Finnish, female, agrarian, or something else. He saw the child as a future member of society and the state. Therefore, the child needed to be educated to understanding fully what the membership of the state means and requires. It is also worth pointing out that Snellman, who is usually seen as Hegel's interpreter and translator in Finland, also refers to Rousseau in his major works.

The second line of thought stressed positivism, science and innovation. It was promoted by Uno Cygnaeus. For him, the origin of education sprang from the Nature itself, and its target was to develop and cultivate the personal internal ethics of each singular pupil. This latter view was more successful and it came to dominate the first steps of the evolving Finnish elementary school. However, these two ideological streams have both been influencing, in some form, Finnish school throughout its history.

The early decades of the 20th century witnessed a certain shift from Hegelian idealism towards positivism and Rousseauan self-regulation in the Finnish philosophy of education. Rousseau stressed the importance of learning

through concrete things in a natural environment, with the help of the senses. A.S. Neill himself followed Rousseau in seeing the doctrine of "original sin" as a means of control. This thought invokes Rousseau's idea of children being born innocent and good, *tabula rasa*, with society corrupting them and making them miserable and cruel.

Rousseau's ideas were adopted in Summerhill where children were encouraged to build tree houses and play in the forest without adult control, a practice that quite clearly originates in Rousseau's ideas. In *Émile*, he promoted *Robinson Crusoe* as the ideal (and the only) book that a child should read before its 15th birthday – provided that those parts where the "corrupting" Friday enters the scene were cut. As a result, Robinson Crusoe was the first fiction book that was read in all parts of society in the global North thereby instilling two centuries of children with ideals of courage and fearless enterprise.

In line with this Rousseauan praise, the 1950s Finnish school reader contained a short story about two boys who wanted to play Robinson. The story was considerably adjusted, however, as the adventurous boys, looking to encounter nature independently, soon returned from their deserted island to the safety of the family, where mother's pancakes and the joys of the domestic sphere were awaiting them. The success narrative of individual genius was thus not impressed quite so heavily on Finnish children as it might have been in other countries: while it was fine to try to go it alone, failure to cope was also permitted, even embraced. Immediate "results" were not expected in learning how to be independent, as society in the form of the family network was readily at hand, supporting the child in growing up "slowly".

This complicated and particular history of educational philosophy is, of necessity, also reflected in the implementation of A.S. Neill's ideas about education in Finland. Doesn't this make Finland an interesting case in thinking about both the practicalities and conceptual lines of everyday utopias in the interstices of differing state and education ideologies in Europe?

**Sirkka Ahonen:** What you Antu say about Finland is true at least in one important sense. For Snellman, it was crucial that people would identify with the state, which represents the highest decency and ethical level compared to the selfishness prevalent in the business world and the competitive interest groups in the civil society. In Finland, we had remarkable utopianists, too. It would be interesting to know, for example, how Matti Kurikka organized children's education in his utopian Finnish migration community Sointula in the early 20th Century Canada.[38]

**Antu Sorainen**: Well, in the contract Kurikka had to sign with the government of British Columbia to get hold of the land for his collective, it was agreed that "all children need to be placed in an English-speaking school in two years after they reach the general school age". They built a separate school early on with native English teachers, such as John Stevens, a Scott who almost died once when he was lost in the utopian island's wilderness for two days. Kurikka's aim was to create a society where public kindergartens and schools would take care of children's upbringing and education so that women could participate in the work force equally with men, even though in gender separated tasks. In 1903, two years before the collective collapsed, there were 88 children in Sointula. In 1904, the first kindergarten was opened. The idea was that every mother could bring all their children, except those who could not walk yet, in the kindergarten, under the condition that they forfeited all their rights to bring up their children themselves. Children lived in the kindergarten day and night, and the house took care of their clothing and hygiene. If some mother wanted to take her child home for a night, it was not resisted in any way but afterwards she had to take care of the repair and washing of the child's clothes. Not every

[38] Matti Kurikka (1863-1915) was a Finnish Tolstoyan teosophian-socialist-utopianist journalist who founded a utopian community first in the North Queensland, Australia, and a second one, *Sointula*, in the British Vancouver. In Kurikka's letters at the time, it is obvious that he did not want to return to Finland without "canons and Mauser riffles", because he saw the country to be at the hands of a "Russian criminal government".

mother was happy with the care that the kids received in the house. This prompted Kurikka to address the issue separately in his magazine, in a rather Rousseauan terms. He asked why it should be enough to carry a child, give birth, breast-feed, wash and caress the infant to make one a good educator: ”How big is the majority of women who spoil their children’s sense of justice during its first year by teaching it to manipulate its mother by crying? By following their own weaknesses and whims they forget that education starts only from that moment when the mother starts to study the true reasons for its child’s evilness, and find ways to cut this off.” (Halminen, 1936.)

**Lastenpaikka from the mothers’ point of view**

**Antu Sorainen:** But back to Finland – how did you, Leena and Sirkka, as young mothers came to put your children in Lastenpaikka; and how you became familiar with the place?

**Leena Eräsaari**: For the first time I heard from Lastenpaikka from our neighbours. Their son had been there and they were joking about some details they had observed, I think it was about the meals: there was always food at the table and children could eat whenever they wanted to. But this habit had already been given up when my son entered the place.

We did not choose Lastenpaikkaa because of its ideology but for the fact that other places on offer were so crap. At the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, when Matti was there, other options were scare. Matti and my older child, Jenny, were both first in Pikku Iita children’s "garden". It was meant for 1-4 year olds, and kept by the Students’ Childcare Society. For children under 4 years old, there really were not that many places. Pikku Iita was located very far from our home, at the other end of the city, but it was a very good place.

When Matti could not go to Pikku Iita anymore, we put him into a council family care for a year. The place was awful, and I felt bad every morning when I took a child there. After this we decided to move him to Lastenpaikka,

and that was such a happy thing to do. No more had I worry about childcare. Matti stayed there until we moved to Jyväskylä in 1982. Even though he upgraded to the Finnish-Russian school he still went to play at Lastenpaikka after the school, together with other boys from there.

My daughter also later took her twins to Lastenpaikka, and also his son, who lived with his two gay fathers.

**Sirkka Ahonen:** I taught at the time in an experimental school (Helsingin Yhtenäiskoulu) and was interested in unconventional education. I discussed Lastenpaikka with my friends and liked the idea of the non-scheduled practice here.

## Ideological reflections

**Antu Sorainen**: How do you think about the ideology of the Summerhillian schools?

**Sirkka Ahonen**: Originally, Summerhill was a profoundly philosophical idea. At the same time, Bertrand Russell founded his own experimental school. Both men, A.S. Neill and Russell, grounded their pedagogical thinking on the vitalism of the time (Bergson's *élan vital*, and similar ideas by others).[39] From this springs the intensive attention they gave to children's corporeality and bodily needs and desires. For example, in Russell's school children spent summers naked.

Neill agreed with Freud and Jung in that they saw that many matters and material things are symbolic. In his book, Neill tells about a boy, who stole a wristwatch. According to Neill's interpretation, the boy did this to compensate the lack of love he had experienced.

[39] *Élan vital* was coined by the French philosopher Henri Bergson in his book *Creative Evolution* (1907). In the book, he addresses the question of self-organisation and spontaneous morphogenesis of things in an increasingly complex manner. *Élan vital* was translated in the English edition as "vital impetus". Usually it is translated by his detractors as "vital force". It is a hypothetical explanation for evolution and development of organisms, which Bergson linked closely with consciousness – with the intuitive perception of experience and the flow of inner time. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Élan_vital#cite_ref-1)

Neill did not actually approve any "impressionist" relationship to study. For him, nothing was obligatory but once one started to study something, one was expected to show perseverance to reach one's goals in the subject.

**Antu Sorainen**: I agree. Neill was deeply influenced by Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich – one of the most radical members of the second generation of psychoanalysts after Freud and the author of the renowned analysis of fascism's mass psychology – in his belief that children should not be denied sexuality: otherwise they would inherit adult fears. The core idea of Summerhill was 'release': "Allowing a child to live out his natural instincts". Neill believed in self-examination and often invoked the concept of "self-regulation", adopted from Reich (1930; 1931), who famously defended the right of youth to genital satisfaction, suggesting that all behaviour should come from the natural self of the child. Neill's thinking on the child as a free creature was revolutionary, but also closely tied to liberal ideas which are conjoined and consolidated by the British tradition of interest politics: groups of individuals positing a free will uniting to protect their shared interests and rights against the authoritarian state. Hence, there is also a strong stress on the concepts of *rights and freedom* in Summerhill ideology.

**Leena Eräsaari:** Personally, I had become familiar with Lastenpaikka before actually reading Neill's books. It may even be that I have never read his texts! A couple of year ago I bought his book from a second-hand shop but it is lies unopened in my shelf.

What comes to the pedagogy literature I read a lots of Soviet pedagogical books back then, Makarenko, and who else…and oh a plenty of those totally boring books from the DDR. Only recently I put those to trash, actually. Had I known that Summerhill in the 1960s Finland would start to interest scholars again, I would have saved them and donated to you! In one of those books, for example, education was attached to State Monopology (*Vamokap* in Finnish, *Staatsmonopolistische kapitalismus* in German). But only Makarenko was

interesting, others I had no powers to read. There were probably other important Soviet pedagogues who were defending communism, but I have forgotten their names now.

I remembered these old "hobbies" when I read Ljudmila Ulitskaja recently. I now advertise her books to everyone! She writes in several of her books about the Soviet education. But now when I come to think about it there was this couple in the Lastenpaikka crew who were enthusiastic about the Soviet education. Also the leading figure behind Lastenpaikka (Seppo Bruun) was at least at some point very impressed by the views on play presented by the DDR pedagogues.

In my own research I have focused on organisations as "travelling ideas" which arrive in a new environment with an already readymade organization. In this environment new ideas and practices are implemented and rooted. From this point of view, I would guess that in Finland, Neill's thinking was complemented and moulded with the old German pedagogical ideas that we already had "ready" here, and then some new Soviet ideas were added. But this is just my rough guess here and now.

**Antu Sorainen**: Are you still interested in Summerhill, or have you actually visited there?

**Sirkka Ahonen**: When working in Britain in 1977-1980 I followed up the Summerhill story and would have liked to visit the place but was not received. Generally, in my view, children are no guinea-pigs. A school must work in terms of informed common sense. Educational opportunity must be equal; therefore I trust the free (without fees) universal public education and detest all kinds of school shopping.[40]

**Antu Sorainen**: I do not think that it is an exception that you were not received there. Apparently, Summerhill children, even though they are quite

[40] See Ahonen 2014.

conscious of the contradictory response from their immediate environment and wider society, are, at the same time, highly protective of their school (Cooper 2014).

**Self-construction in a Summerhillian environment**

**Antu Sorainen**: What makes Summerhill a unique School is that it is based on the principle of children's self-regulation. According to Neill (1960, 21), "no culprit at Summerhill ever shows any signs of defiance or hatred of the authority of his community" since they all have an instrumental part in creating and sustaining it. Neill believed that "free children are not easily influenced; the absence of fear is the finest thing that can happen to a child". It has been claimed that, consequently, adults who spent their childhoods at Summerhill (theoretically) have an integrated and secure identity that is not easily open to outside threats and neuroses.

In the mid-1970s, some of these kinds (most Summerhillian ideas) in Helsinki *Lastenpaikka* had already been changed – but it was still resolutely utopian, alternative and experimental. Matti, you entered the kindergarten at this point as a child. How would you describe your relationship to the Utopian now?

**Matti Eräsaari**: I have noticed that I am reflecting on my psychological inheritance from *Lastenpaikka* all the time with my own child: she is really strong-willed and stubborn, and I am quite proud of this! I even take some credit for it, because I have let her do her own decisions from the start of her life (and so has my spouse): "Do you want to do X or Y? Shall we take bikes or train?" Etc. I know that most parenting manuals tell you that the child should not be allowed to decide on too many things on her own, but it does not seem to have affected my daughter in any negative way. But then again, we, as her parents, have been affected: nothing ever happens quickly as the child has the power to influence things, and she never accepts ungrounded imperatives but

offers strong counter-arguments if one tries to tell her what to do. But I think it is great wisdom to be capable of questioning things that are offered to you as self-evident, and to assess arguments that have been presented to you as something natural or righteous.

**Antu**: Do you see a difference between your experiences of the children's culture in *Lastenpaikka* and in the comprehensive school?

**Matti:** I think that the moment when I understood that I had adopted a new "ethos" was in my new hometown Jyväskylä. I met a group of my old mates from *Lastenpaikka* and the Finnish-Russian School. There was some kid we did not want to hang out with, and I suggested that we should get rid of him. The other children told me that this was not the way to handle the situation – it would not feel nice for the kid. I then made another inappropriate suggestion: I started to share my candy with others when this "wrong" kid was not around. Again, the other children told me that it was not a right thing to do. When I defended my position by explaining that we had too little candy they corrected me: "A good person will share even if they don't have much, a bad person won't no matter how much they have."

At that moment, I remembered that "this is how we always did it" in *Lastenpaikka*. I understood that my new mates in Jyväskylä were acting on the basis of a totally different set of rules than my old group: that in this new "normal school" gang other kids can be shunned; that it is OK to refuse to share candy with everyone present, etc. I had never before realized the difference between these two different spheres of rules that had been actualized in my child life. But when I realised it, I felt ashamed at once, because the morals of the old *Lastenpaikka* gang felt right – and my alienation from it felt wrong. The background for this was the explicit ideal of equality in Lastenpaikka, even though I do not remember how it was taught to us kids.

Generally, the shift to a normal non-metropolitan Finnish elementary school in Jyväskylä (mid-1st grade) came as a shock. I had no skills at all! I was

sitting and raising my hand to teacher's questions in a too disciplined manner, because this was how I was raised to behave in the Finnish-Russian School; I could not sing the normative Christian songs which all the other kids memorised without notes; I tried to teach to my new friends that one cannot talk about "Russians" ("ryssä") in a dismissive way, and that bad guys do not fight with MIGs… Finally, I befriended a Swedish-speaking boy who was as equally "out" in a Finnish-speaking school as I was in the "normal" sphere of the comprehensive school in Jyväskylä.

**Antu**: Summerhill children's identities are more internally than externally generated, claims Gorman. In his approach, in viewing the curriculum as a development, or as a becoming, or as a pathway, or as, perhaps, a milieu, these open and ethical views can find sustenance and support in the actual lived experience of former students, and thus function as the living proof in its former students' adult lives. Matti, what are your views on this; in which ways your self-image has been influenced by alternative education?

**Matti**: I would say that *Lastenpaikka* produced self-confident, extroverted children, but what kind of self-image can be attached to this? It is difficult to speculate on what was created in the kindergarten and what comes from somewhere else. I am quite confident, however, about my own understanding and skills in problem solving in acute situations. This may be seen as one heritage from the alternative education.

**Leena:** In my understanding, Lastenpaikka influenced Matti's self-perceptions to some degree, but other things influenced him, too, which surrounded him when he was a kid. Where I saw some influence of Lastenpaikka on Matti: He fell in love with the Narnia books, and in particular, in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. Matti collected Tolkien's books in different languages and studied mushrooms in the same way that hobbits did. There is this family anecdote of Matti that we tell to everyone. He wanted so desperately to be a hobbit that he glued pieces of woollen yarn to his legs.

The reading he did, and Lastenpaikka as an early educational environment that he participated, together probably strengthened Matti's faith and desire for "an original communism" or whatever gift-changing economy it was that he was convinced of. I mean: all these factors together influenced his world-views. But on top of this, he and some of the Lastenpaikka boys had bands; there were always bands in Lastenpaikka, and there have always been different bands in his life ever since – it is a form of boy sociality.

My daughter Jenny was not directly influenced by Summerhillian ideologies as she herself was not in Lastenpaikka, but there are indirect routes: sometimes she went to Lastenpaikka to pick Matti up, and also other times because one of the ideas was to "treat the whole family". Also, Bruun boys spent a lot of time in our home so Jenny met them a lot. Further, Jenny also went to the Finnish-Russian School and speaks fluent Russian. Matti did not learn it so well because he was so small and in Jyväskylä there was no teaching available in Russian.

People who gathered around Lastenpaikka were those of our own "bubble" – our friends, of both of the parents and children, even one of my teachers from the university, in Social Work. Seppo Bruun and his boys became actually family friends. The boys came to visit Matti several times in Jyväskylä, and Matti travelled to Vantaa to visit them. When Olli, my youngest son was small we lived in Jyväskylä where there were not many options to choose anything alternative in terms of kindergartens.

I do not know if all the children of the founding members were in Lastenpaikka. The most important fact is that it was a social meeting place for parents and other adults who supported its ideas – hence, it took care also of adults. There was beer at the cash bar in parents' nights, for example. There were really many types of people active around Lastenpaikka, hence it was educating for everyone involved.

**Sirkka Ahonen**: In our case, Lastenpaikka was not close enough to

home, thus my son stayed in it only a few weeks. Therefore, I can't estimate the affect of its idealist framework on his self-perceptions. In the Summerhill book, there is a lot of about the experiences of the children.

**Leena Eräsaari**: I would like to add this: I did not witnessed it myself but one of my former schoolmates since 50 years told me that her children had also been in Lastenpaikka. But these kids were girls, and she found that in girls were "underdogs" there. The leading figure, Seppo Bruun, had only sons himself, so it is theoretically possible that he put boys in a higher esteem than girls… But personally, I did not see anything like this happening. My daughter's daughter Aada (one of the twins) is the only girl whose path in the Lastenpaikka I followed closely, and she never complained about how girls were treated there. And she is very sensitive to all forms of discrimination.

**Antu Sorainen**: The involvement of parents and the rest of the family in Lastenpaikka is interesting, as Neill believed that the function of children is to live their own life, not the life that anxious parents and other adults think they should live or one governed by the purpose of educators who think they know what is best for children. Interference and guidance on the part of adults only produces *a generation of robots*, Neill wrote. *Lastenpaikka* was understood as an extended family that created a safe environment for children to grow in. Education freed from bureaucratic restrictions was seen as an important element in the growth of *independent* life and in taking *responsibility* for oneself and others. Obviously, this idea could be matched with the "education of parents", but it must have felt culturally strange at the time?

**Leena Eräsaari**: Co-operation between the kindergarten and parents was new at least since my own childhood, as it was not usual in the 1950s or even 1960s that parents were involved in their children's education.

I myself had never been in kindergarten, as those were targeted only for the kids of the really impoverished families. My mother was a working mother, but the neighbourhood women took care of their own and some other children

(like me). My school was typical German pedagogy-influenced institution where authority was highly appreciated. I think that my parents, who came from the lower middle-class would not have dared to co-operate with the school because for them, middle class presented some scary and redeemed people, up from their own rank.

There were several people in the original Association Board (for example Marianne Laxén) who were also long-time activists once the place existed but I did not know all of them. In the kindergarten "field", there were hierarchical struggles based on one's education, as it mattered in terms of authority whether one had a university degree or some lower level education. For example, Seppo Bruun came in the picture only after he took his MA degree first elsewhere. He retired only a several years ago.

**To Conclude: The rise of home schools and neoliberal thought**

**Antu Sorainen**: *Lastenpaikka* continues in its original location in the middle-class Helsinki suburb even though The City of Helsinki has reduced its freedoms in considerable ways during the last years. However, while its working principles have been adjusted and renegotiated many times, A.S. Neill's ideals of 'free' education form the deep basis of its everyday organizing, for example, that children should be largely left to play and learn without knowing adults, in a site that offers plenty of options for playing.

This autonomy of children seems to contradict the current trend of attachment parenting and another alternative rising trend among the middle class parents: homeschooling. What do you think about the current "boom" of home schools in Finland?

**Sirkka Ahonen**: I would not compare the recent alternative and home schools that have been developed in Finland to Summerhill. Many of those are Christian schools, based on the "Philistine" ideas that "our children are far too good to go to school with the random children". Only a small part of those

schools that have distanced themselves from the comprehensive school ideology have been pedagogically revolutionary; for example, Ilola School at Vantaa (a city next to Helsinki). In Sweden, free schools are mostly Islamic schools, or, alternatively, they are about making business as they make profit on the expense of the state, which is then sent tax-free to the Cayman Islands.

**Antu Sorainen**: Yes, it seems likely that the current stress on individualism will be prompting some radical resistance in the education sphere but an actual Summerhillian School has yet to be actualised in Finland. The idea has been revived recently in social media groups and activists meetings in Turku and Helsinki. One idea that has been implemented has been to establish a 'free' online *Feeniks School*. It follows the pattern of home schools first made popular by hippies, and later adopted by extremist Christian sects, mainly in the US. It remains unclear to what extent the activists behind the Feeniks School and other home schools are interested in applying A.S. Neill's ideas as many of them are also influenced by the so called eco-parenting and attachment parenting ideas that do not parallel Summerhillian ideologies without certain problems.

Here, a relevant question is to ask if the emerging alternative schools, in attempting to divert their curriculum from the state schools, could avoid being dovetailed with neoliberalism's interest in encouraging individual "choice". This question touches not only the relations between the individual and the culture but also those between social movements and the state, as utopian sites always have a complex and complicated relationship to mainstream culture and its norms.

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*DOSSIER*

# INSPECTION AT SUMMERHILL

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**Abstract:** This paper considers issues surrounding the 1999 OFSTED inspection of Summerhill school (in Suffolk) which led to a Notice of Closure, and subsequent successful appeal on the grounds of inappropriate judgements made by OFSTED inspectors. It is useful to note that Summerhill School has existed in the independent sector offering 'progressive education' since the 1920s. However, following a 1990s inspection from OFSTED, its existence was threatened in terms of its freedom in future continuing to offer an independent UK-based fully 'democratic' schooling (despite the fact that parents pay for their children to attend Summerhill outside any UK state offering). This paper identifies problems for organisations subject to inspection which do not conform to the formal organisation model.

**Keywords:** Summerhill, School Effectiveness, Independent School Inspection.

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## Introduction

The extent to which an OFSTED inspection of an atypical independent school (Summerhill) is able to make appropriate judgements about that school remains a matter of some contradiction and consideration. The purpose of inspection is to improve schools yet given different philosophical standpoints that underpin education at Summerhill, the question of how far might inspection undermine potential for improvement at Summerhill throught the constraint of the very process in attaining accuracy of judgement is posited.

Summerhill maintains child democracy or freedom as its unique focus. Summerhill School has existed in the independent sector offering 'progressive education' since the 1920s. However, following a 1990s UK state inspection, its existence was threatened in terms of its freedom in future continuing to offer an independent UK-based fully 'democratic' schooling, yet at appeal, the DFEE dropped its case against Summerhill after only 3 days of tribunal hearing (Playdon, 2000).

Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) had been responsible for the inspection of Summerhill school until OFSTED replaced HMI in conducting the 1999 inspection. However, HMI inspection was infrequent nationally and reports were relatively secret (Ormston and Shaw 1994). Whereas, the intention of OFSTED is not only to expose 'failing schools' but to work towards international comparators, which allow economic judgements to be made with our global competitors in terms of educational provision (Ormston and Shaw, 1994). Yet Summerhill attracts learners worldwide and parents choosing and funding a Summerhill education had not perceived the school as 'failing' or Summerhill would fail simply by the parental withdrawal of student cohorts. Summerhill had a longevity exceeding 80 years.

In 1999, OFSTED inspection judgements were based upon evidence from observations; pre-inspection evidence (which includes statistical evidence from the school as well as policy and curriculum documentation and staff job

descriptions). The examination of pupil work; and discussions with Headteachers, Deputy Heads, Senior Managers, pupils and teachers supplemented pre-inspection evidence (Clegg and Billington 1994). Whereas, independent schools had largely been able to avoid the full UK governmental model (Dunsford 1998). The independent sector negotiated separate 'modus operandi' to that forced upon state-funded provision. Possibly, this suggests a lack of acceptance for OFSTED inspection methods.

Simple analysis of test results does not necessarily offer any indication to educational standards given the differences of children and any difficulties they may incur. Report publication may merely result in an educational provision being 'submitted to trial by inadequately informed opinion' (Barton et al, 1980). Parents may be the least able to interpret inspection if they do not 'buy into' educational consumerism' (Radnor et al, 1997). Yet, in the Major era of increasing 'consumerism' of the public sector, viewing education as a commodity purveyed through market mechanisms, had meant that internal scrutiny of schools was generally accepted (Bush, 1994). There is a parental need for confidence that real improvement takes place within institutions. Since political accountability is determined by policy popularity or level of interest to meet needs of voting public this 'confidence' needs to be held within the community (Radnor et al, 1997). Compliance to national educational 'norms' were thus imposed by a national inspection regime (Bush 1987).

Since inspection highlights any managerial failing to meet educational 'norms', self-managed educational institutions no longer hide shortcomings it was claimed. Compliant behaviour and discipline are judged together with the quality of learning experience (Smith, 1995). A fundamental methodology lies with a prescribed criteria and thus, perception for behaviour and order against which levels of learning might be judged. This might have proved to be a source of 'difficulty' for any inspection of Summerhill since Summerhill sets out to meet demand for an education which falls outside of educational 'norms'. It

should also be pointed out that learning and education are both intangible. Both are open to highly different interpretations of 'quality' eg exceptionally high standards, consistency (zero defects), fitness for purpose, value for money or transformation (Harvey, 1993). Summerhill may have 'fallen foul' of this and subsequent to appeal of the inspection judgement, Summerhill set up an independent inspection. Summerhill heralded the judgement as being directly at variance with Summerhill school educational philosophy rather than being issues for educational improvement (Cunningham 2000).

The Centre for Self-Managed Learning, (which Cunningham chairs), carried out an independent inquiry to successfully counteract the OFSTED inspection. This included another inspection (Cunningham, 2000). The Independent Inspection team produced visit reports facilitating each inspector as free to comment, unconstrained. The independent inspection time comprised university lecturers, a psychologist, teaching school heads, an educational consultant and a children's author (Cunningham, 2000). The independent inquiry argued that the statistical evidence of exit award attainment used by OFSTED at Summerhill was an inadequate method of comparison to other schools. To explain, low school entry numbers for a small school, in any one year, skews any true interpretation with national trends (Cunningham 2000). The independent inquiry claimed a 'better picture of the school' could be achieved by a longer inspection visit (Cunningham, 2000). Further distinction may be achieved from comparison of the autonomous reports from the independent inspectors with the report derived from grading criterion of OFSTED inspection which suggests that inspection 'judgements' lie with affiliations of 'schools of thought' as to what is 'measurable' quality or leads to raised standards.

The OFSTED inspection included a review of the prior 1990 HMI report (OFSTED 1999) and previous reports since 1949 (Cunningham, 2000). The independent inquiry also reviewed Social Services reports including those

made after the OFSTED visit and surveyed leaver, parent and community attitudes to the school. The drawing by the independent inspection team of wider documentary sources reveals a perception of insufficiency in the textual sources used to inform government inspectors (Cunningham, 2000). The Independent Inspection team autonomously produced reports with free comment, unconstrained from each observer. Whereas the OFSTED report observation grading was flawed at best, at worst deficient or inadequate since 'behaviourally-anchored criteria' grading is inappropriate as it provides only a 'unidimensional' measure (Wragg 1999). Observing and judging 'good teaching' is dependent affiliation to school of thought. Where 'concerns' for pupil control over curricula have been cited as 'problems' within Progressive Education (Silcock, 1997). The Notice for Complaint served at Summerhill identified areas that must be addressed yet a standard template feedback was not 'contextualised' to meet the needs of 'democratic' schooling. The statutory responsibility of inspection is to report the 'quality' of education, the standards achieved, the efficient use of resources and the spiritual, moral and cultural development of the pupils (Clegg and Billington, 1994). Yet the time constraints upon OFSTED inspection may only result in a 'still photograph' of the institution rather than any reflection over time of the spiritual, moral or cultural development (Bowring-Carr, 1996). Possibly, this suggests that the need to report back on Summerhill took predominance over any encouragement for proactive change or real improvement. Weakness must lay also in any philosophical failure of inspection in terms of fulfilling 'local accountability' (Radnor et al, 1997) needs of Summerhill parents and governors.

In order to gain reprieve from the notice, the independent inquiry mainly highlighted the noted inadequacies of inspection methodologies. Methodologically, 'observation validity' is founded by the purpose of the observation (Croll: 1986). Observation 'snapshots', absent of recognition for the underpinning theory-laden values against which judgements are made

(Hammersley:1994, Hitchcock and Hughes: 2001) may originate from within a reductionist, politically-founded paradigm through compliance to national educational 'norms' (Bush, 1997). A different methodological and philosophical approach may have facilitated a different outcome. The independent inquiry identified OFSTED claimed a 'drift' in standards which could not be substantiated through Summerhill's results. As a result, the independent inquiry considered that it was the school's philosophy, rather than observation evidence, which resulted in the 1999 OFSTED Notice of Closure (Cunningham, 2000). The independent inquiry was successful in defending OFSTED's resulting Notice of Complaint, therefore, it may be argued that a difference of philosophy was at the root. Summerhill argued that inspectors did not assess 'out of class learning activities' through 'time constraints'. Summerhill pupils complained that inspectors were only interested by 'lessons' and held no other interest in other aspects of the learning (environment) (Cunningham, 2000). The framework for inspection measures institutions against educational norms and Summerhill claimed that this basic element would result in inappropriate judgements of Summerhill. This paper then deliberates upon school improvement and effectiveness and whether inspection could provide vehicle for improvement for Summerhill given the idea that pre-defined constructs may not facilitate 'reality' upon observation.

Views of A. S. Neill in his and others' writing (Hart (1970), Hemmings (1973), Walmsley (1969)) provide background to the acclaimed 'unique', philosophical approach of Summerhill and potentially, Summerhillian thinking regarding inspection. The work of AS Neill provides indications of the influences since founding of the school over 80 years ago. The philosophical underpinnings of Summerhill as an independent, self proclaimed 'Free School' is an important starting point. A. S. Neill, the founder of Summerhill, had authored texts, which outline the school's philosophy which he espoused as an antedote to the negative influences of traditional restrictive timetables and

schooling programmes. Neill's publication, Hearts not Heads in the School, (Neill, 1944), written when Summerhill school was 23 years old. It relates the use of psychology in school – possibly visionary opinions for the time of writing - that asylums hold people who are considered mad merely because they cannot fit into an insane society. Neill (1944) suggests the world was moving away from Individualism to some sort of collectivism with the future of education treating the masses in such a way that the individual will be more likely to be pliable. He claimed the gregariousness of Summerhill lay with 'a mother-child attitude' (Neill, 1944, p 17-28). Neill's (1944) views of social psychology and its application to education (as control) are illustrated, when discussing Curriculum. Neill's deeply held views of a state educated 'Powerless Youth' are clarified by claims to the role of play as opposing to classroom discipline arguing only a small per cent of teachers are on the side of the child (p139). It might be drawn that Neill felt other schools were not generally developmental socially nor embraced the theme of freedom - which was of politically fashionable importance at the time of much of his writing. He considered freedom as an essential need, which might be attributed to a post-First World War period of writing. Within his work, it would appear that much of the 'deviance of learners' appears to be attributed to a failure of satisfying children's need by educationalists. Neill (1944) appears to feel that rather than addressing the whole needs of the individual, education is delivered in a functional fashion. This might be evidenced by his questioning of the opportunities for fellowship within schooling. Neill (1944) argued that there was no real fellowship unless community is free from taboo and morality and fear, that crime will always flourish in a society whose emotions are repressed. Education, he argued should aim at preventing buried emotions from being inimical to society, education should concentrate on feeling and not on thinking (Neill, 1944). Neill (1972) in Neill! Neill! Orange Peel! provides additional insight, in particular, providing some reflections upon Neill's view of his educational role and relationships with

inspection. Much of his writing is littered with the failings of state education which coloured the philosophy that Neill proposed as the foundations of Summerhill. Neill (1972) illustrates comparisons to educational development in Britain by claiming it the freest country in the world since he believed Summerhill would not be allowed elsewhere (p 53) due to old patriarchal demand for obedience and discipline being as strong as ever in state systems (p. 186).

Perceptions of public accountability are included in the analogies of Neill (1972), where he considers that it is the external validity of educational practices which are endorsed by the users and providers of education. Neill (1972) radically suggests that public accountability does not meet the needs of the child but merely the views of the general public. Neill (1972) fundamentally challenges the approach of inspection of Summerhill suggesting this promotes insincere judgement of educational need insofar as educational accountability for state provision by each government lies with the acceptance of practices through the ballot box.

Historically Summerhill had a mixed experience of inspection. This seems to be explained by Neill as being largely dependent upon the individual HMI inspector. At one level, he suggests that the individual inspector might be limited by own culture and intellect versus at another level, that of the inspection regime. Despite the main commentary of inspections lying with the deficiencies of traditional teaching practices at Summerhill, by contrast, on one occasion inspectors suggest that the progressive philosophy of Summerhill was appropriate as an educational environment but merely mis-delivered. This suggests a looseness of HMI inspection which facilitated differing views of the appropriate standard, or nature of the Summerhill educational experience. Insight to Neill's view of the potential validity of inspection of self-funded schools might also be drawn from expressed Neill views, where a clear sense of resentment that, despite parental approval of the educational experience of

Summerhill, the state would only accept Summerhill's educational role if it were fully consistent with state educational policy. Having abandoned lessons Summerhill pupils often bloom late but a visiting Inspector would class this as 'failure' (Hemmings, 1973). Neill (1944) suggested inspection makes for insincerity. The kids tidy up but they feel self-conscious and unhappy. He questions why the teaching profession should tolerate inspection when other professions would not, claiming that for fifty years educated and intelligent parents have sent their children to Summerhill pleased with the results, why should Summerhill be judged by an official standard that is not appropriate to its philosophy. Neill claimed that Summerhill is primarily for living and refused to be judged by a body of people who think of learning and teaching methods and discipline only (p 155). Yet clearly, despite claiming the UK to be 'the freest country in the world', Neill (1944) viewed the role of the state in educational terms as powerful. One to which Summerhill (and Neill) would need to conform sufficiently in order to be able to continue Neill's mission of 'free schooling'. In essence, this suggests potential conflict between Summerhillian philosophy and inspection. Neill (1944) identifies views inspectors as contradictory to Summerhillian ideals. He suggests that Summerhill is concerned holistically with the individual and their future engagement in life and freedom. Whereas, he perceives state-led education as based in examinations and timetabling, despite, fundamentally that Summerhilll has attained examination success at the end of schooling (Neill 1944).

**Critics of Summerhill**

Should Summerhill be compliant in its educational practice, if those seeking academic accreditation still achieve qualification? Neill and Summerhill have been both admired and criticised internationally. Much of Neill's work is considered controversial, particularly as his texts address issues of sexual freedom within schooling as well as religious beliefs based in psychological

interpretations. Historically, Summerhill has been under worldwide scrutiny by those who interested by what has been accepted as a unique and possibly pioneering approach to schooling. To present any possible reception of Summerhill by educationalists, review of some of the arguments attracted by Neill might illustrate the emotional feelings that Summerhillian philosophy has attracts Potentially, such literature also may have influenced an inspection team (although they may have been aware of this prior to inspection) since the study of Summerhill has not been an uncommon topic in teacher training and this may have impacted upon their judgements when conducting inspection.

Contributions from the following authors (Barrow, 1978, Culkin et al, 1970) provide some of the arguments surrounding Neill's approaches and present a range of impressions of Summerhill - to include further reflections upon earlier HMI inspection mentioned by Neill in his work. One adverse view of Summerhill, that it was 'old hat' rather than revolutionary. The child as a Noble Savage, needing only to be let alone in order to insure intellectual salvation, or they develop horrid neuroses later on in life. By leaving the kids alone they'll educate themselves was educational 'guff' as old as the human race (Rafferty 1970, p. 11). By sharp contrast, claims that Summerhill made educationalists understand that instead of requiring the child to fit himself to the requirements of the school, schools should adapt to the requirements of the child. By putting the child on an assembly-line, continuing traditional methods of 'education' have really nothing whatever to do with the functions and purposes of a genuine education (Montagu, 1970). Neill allows it to be seen that a teacher should be one who cares for the student ministering to the unique needs and personality of each student toward creativity.

Some of the concerns of traditionalist education are also echoed in criticism of Neill insofar as he recognises that by making the school 'fit the child', life in later years will not recast its iron imperatives to fit the individual - a human being must come to an arrangement with the world about him

(Rafferty, 1970). Whilst schools meet individual needs and differences it cannot 'fit' every child (Rafferty 1970, p 14). Traditionalist, modernist criticism of Progressive education is evidenced when lessons are optional. The Progressive Education strand which runs through the tapestry of Summerhill suggests that what is learned is less significant than how it is learned. In particular, that nowhere in the Summerhill philosophy does there seem to be the merest hint that children should learn to think and act in an orderly, disciplined manner despite the experience of the great mass of humanity over the centuries which has demonstrated that 'the easiest, most efficient, and most economical way to learn is in organised classes' (Rafferty 1970, p. 16-17). Yet Culkin (1970) writes that although they had never visited Summerhill 'it is a holy place…charged with wisdom, love' and suggested that the terror of educational critics of the idea is probably the most accurate measure of its validity have (Culkin 1970, p. 27-28). He suggested that the wisdom of Summerhill is exquisitely suited to the needs of the child of the electronic age. It begins with the respect for and love for the child and Neill's concern for total cognitive and affective growth of the child has never been easier to acknowledge than in our day when the gravitational pull of the electronic media is pulling us. Yet, traditional institutions stress the fragmented and compartmentalised style of life (Culkin, 1970, p. 31).

A more cynical viewing of Summerhill argues against Neill's ideology, suggesting that the underlying dogma of the Summerhill faith is 'that children, if not subjected to any adult pressures or influences are perfect seeds that will turn into beings of predestined goodness' (Herchinger, 1970, p 35). Whilst accepting Summerhill as a startlingly successful in approaching its own ideal, would Summerhill have remained intact if it had many more than 45 youngsters? Simply, the great majority of the world's parents would not believe in Neill's basic concepts so there would be no way of setting up Summerhill for great numbers (Herchinger, 1970, p35-38). Barrow (1978) argues the

Summerhill philosophy of self-regulation is problematic as Summerhill cannot sensibly be regarded as neutral foundation territory and that child immediate happiness of freedom to attend lessons might not be the most suitable for preparation to happy adult lives in wider society. Whilst educational theory is tested through practice, the absence of systematic inquiry, evidence or due caution leads to inaccurate conclusions. Neill's philosophies, absent of these factors fail to recognise the nature of children changes as they grow older and this may be a consequence of their schooling rather than innate qualities (Barrow, 1978). Setting up a school within an ideology does not necessarily prove the wisdom of it. It is the long-term consequences which allow judgements to be made. By presenting 'problems' with Summerhill philosophy, Barrow (1978) further unveils problems for inspection. He contends that simply looking at a school in practice does not allow for judgement of whether a particular system of education is working. Equally, even if Summerhill works in practice does not present that it is a good school.

Walmsley (1969) might assist appreciation of the literature-depicted atmosphere at Summerhill. Consistent to this image portrayed, impressions might also be gained from Walmsley (1969), and by Hemmings (1973), of the atmosphere of Summerhill as a demonstration of an 'anti-school' (p194). Yet the 'effectiveness' of Summerhill school might be thought about in light of Bernstein's work, in The New Era (February 1967) and Psychology Today (October 1968) USA. He interviewed 50 Old Summerhillians. It is noted that the descriptions are probably no more damning than might be expected from a group of ex-pupils of any school. It was not apparent that this sample had been permanently handicapped in their careers. It would appear that Bernstein's research substantiates an academically effective school. Though Bernstein (1968) noted the descriptions were simply unique when describing Neill. Descriptions included that it was always difficult to know how much Neill was seeing since he was curiously aware and yet unaware of what went on in the

school - Neill at Summerhill was like seeing the tip of an iceberg - in touch with everything yet seemingly totally oblivious.

School improvement is fundamental to the validity of inspection (West-Burnham, 1997) however. Whilst the inspection draws on qualitative evaluation both the time constraints and reliability of judgements present issues in terms of interpretation (Ferguson et al, 2000). These issues may have contributed to the invalidity of the Summerhill inspection since it was unique. Yet claims for improvement through inspection warrant cautious examination. Rather than gaining greater or multiple insights (eg from pluralist post-modernist inquiry, against which actions 'for improvement' might be negotiated with the 'democratic' or progressive education being inspected), inspection possibly reinforces compliance to educational 'norms' rather than improvement. Certainly in the Summerhillian case, Neill (1944) forecast a government agenda which might predict the emotional reception of an inspection as a threat to Summerhill's existence.

The assertion is that an effective school is effective for all its students irrespective of ability, gender or age. Many schools seem to be 'effective' in catering for the needs of some of their students but given finite resources, struggle to provide an equally high standard for all – do such schools qualify for the title 'effective'? Nowhere does school effectiveness debate the educational values against which indirectly schools such as Summerhill may be unconsciously judged. Its motivation is that raising achievement will enhance competitive economic status of nation state, it under-theorizes and such assumed self evidence of the raising standards chorus is bound to fail. Difference is to be valued and not to be closed down by straightforward recipes and as such calls for more careful robust responses (Slee, 1998). School reform has frequently failed in the past because educators and policy makers are reluctant to acknowledge the nature of education problems and willing to accept partial answers. Optimism has helped avoid dealing with tough questions.

Governments need to take a more balanced policy approach to assessing school performance and making them accountable. Even using a value-added analysis, schools will not perform at the same level (Thrupp 1999). Good policy would acknowledge that schools will be more or less effective but will also be realistic about the nature of the students (whilst typically this argument refers to equality in state schools this can be equal to uniqueness of Summerhill).

Education in Britain has been a turnstile for employment or academic success. Historically, truancy amongst girls was allowed and not seen as an educational problem since they might service the home – arguably a 'backdoor' Summerhill-style philosophy for non-compulsory lesson attendance. It is only the labour market crisis for skilled labour that mass compulsory education has marched forward in terms of ensuring educational provision is achieved via marketisation, report competition and league tables (Slee et al, 1998). However, there is little clarity of thinking upon a democratic school in a boarding school context, as would be the case for Summerhill.

Summerhill as an independent school is selective in terms of its pupil population and generally, as it is self-funding, pupils would tend to be from middle-income earners. However, since Summerhill attracts learners globally, ethnicity might be a factor for the school yet the Summerhill philosophy treats them as 'the same' – one best way? Yet, issues of motivation are key themes of Neill' criticism of educational provision and areas that Summerhill philosophy is 'held out' to address where the ideas of A S Neill advocated that the school should 'fit the child'. It is clear that the initial inspection regime did not set out to inspect independent schools such as Summerhill. However, it was within this same inspection regime that the Summerhill appeal case arose and in its intention to 'raise standards', Summerhill was threatened with closure.

Summerhill might also have suffered from its organic structure as Bush (1995), in terms of his theory surrounding an ambiguity model for analysing the school as an organisation notes issues of the ambigious school. The ambiguity

model portrays an organisation composed of an aggregation of loosely coupled subunits, which are subject to change (Bush, 1995). Relevance to Summerhill is clearly evidenced by testimony both from students and staff of Summerhill. Students claimed Summerhill as constantly changing. Problems may have arisen by the demands of a democratic culture, which loads consensual agreement, upon possible factions or subunits of Summerhill staff. Educational professional 'freedom' and deeply held anarchical teaching philosophies may have hampered the consensus required, in terms of time span, for agreement of staff to work towards many of the preparations for inspection offered by 'friends' advising Summerhill.

Within an ambiguity school, there is uncertainly over the relative power of parts of the organisation and power varies dependent upon the levels of fluid staff participation. As an analytical model, the ambiguity organisation assumes a 'problematic' technology insofar, generally, the processes are not properly understood. However, loose coupling translates into groups based on common values (Bush 1995). The unplanned decisions emanating from a 'fluid democracy', depicted in both Neill's writing, and the testimony of Summerhill staff, and students, stresses the decentralisation of Summerhill. It also illustrates potentially the difficulties of accountability faced by Summerhill. Within the ambiguity model, vague and unclear objectives provide inadequate guides for institutional behaviour. Rather than pre-determined objectives determining practice, decision making represents an opportunity for discovering goals (Bush, 1995). This might be consistent with the democratic processes of Summerhill since the lengthy pre-inspection staff discussions appear to suggest a review of teaching practices by staff, assisted by externals, leading to a discovery of the varied translations of Neill's philosophy by staff's own interpretive classroom practices.

The rules for the decision making process of Summerhill are clearly defined by the 'democracy' advocated by Neill's work. This contrasts against

any perceived lack of definition for decision making of the ambiguity structure. Yet, issues surrounding the extent of staff participation reflect the model. Particularly this is evidenced through the interview with member of staff, who noted that Summerhill staff meetings do not translate into full staff attendance and may be 'dysfunctional' and staff 'don't see it relevant'. Where Summerhill differs, perhaps, lies with the delegation, or potential abdication, by the management translating educational practices from Neill's philosophy and allowing freedom of attendance to staff. This 'freedom' dictates a fluid participation and fundamental ambiguity. Equally, the staff member interviewed confessed 'staff don't always get informed', suggesting further ambiguity of purpose and practice. A further feature of the ambiguity model is the formation of cliques or factions who attempt to rationalise the environment to translate its practices and possibly judgements of 'dysfunctional' lie with the perceptions of insiders or outsiders of such groups.

Within the ambiguity model, specific goals may be unclear but teachers accept the broad aims of education and there are predictable features which serve to clarify expected behaviour in accordance with 'rules'. The professional socialisation of staff assimilates the expected patterns through re-mentoring and reduces the uncertainty and unpredictability of education (Bush 1995). Much of Neill's work is composed as an antedote to the inadequacy of other educational provision, it may be inferred that Summerhill sought to 'cut itself off' as a sanctuary from state educational provision. In isolating itself from the outside world, despite still admitting pupils internationally, it may be interpreted that Summerhill produced a stable environment for its democratic community. It might be considered that Neill's philosophy sought to provide impervious boundaries for Summerhill. If Summerhill was an ambiguous organisation, would present itself with difficulties insofar as ambiguous models offer little practical guidance for its leadership (Bush 1995)? Yet if the notion of democratic Summerhill community meetings is about consensual 'law making',

by contrast to the Ambiguity model should Summerhill be considered a collegial model?

Collegial models emphasize that power and decision-making should be shared within the organisation (Bush 1995). Summerhill might be depicted as purely collegial. There is a common set of values through Neill's philosophies and these lead to shared educational objectives between both staff and students. Size is a feature of Neill philosophy. Popenoe (1970) argues that Neill would have been upset if Summerhill operated on too big a size as it would be impersonal. This might be consistent with the difficulty of lengthy decision-making to avoid contrived collegiality. Equally, collegial models present for ambiguity for external accountability. In the case of Summerhill inspection process, the collegial nature of debating all matters within the community led to conflict in terms of the expectations of inspectors of their educational leader.

A feature of collegial models is that the structure is an objective fact which has clear meanings for all members of the institution (Bush 1995). Summerhill does not provide clear meaning for all members. It might be considered there is a lateral structure for Summerhill. That the leader does not strongly influence decisions. This is consistent with a colleagial model. However, this leads to tension of leadership conflicting between accountability and participation. It could be suggested that like collegial models, Summerhill is strongly normative and this tends to obscure. Whilst consensual decision making seems to lie at Summerhill's heart, fluid participation may mean that the effectiveness of a collegial model is either undermined or its collegial nature forfeited to ambiguity insofar as apathy by staff or pupils to attend meetings fails any collegial model. An interesting perspective might be that should Summerhill prove to be collegial, then it should be applauded as a 'preferred' model to be aimed for by educational preference (Bush 1995) by contrast to an ambiguous model, which might be judged as chaotic and unstable. The inspection report suggests that inspectors perceived a chaotic educational

freedom. Whereas the court appeal case appears to have perceived Summerhill as collegial and as such, a valid philosophy to delivery of a broad and full curriculum at parent's choice. Perhaps, the leadership of Summerhill provides further evidence of whether Summerhill aligns more closely to collegial or ambiguity models.

Dimmock (2000) argues that school effectiveness is essentially reviewing 'failings' by schools. Therefore, judgements of Summerhill pupil attainment at key stages in core subjects would lead to perceptions of failure, despite Summerhill appeal defence that final examination results did not support judgements of educational failing. It can only be considered that concerns for Summerhill were such that their sole route for improvement was to issue the Notice of Complaint. One analysis for subsequent improvement might be provided by the concerns with regards to protection of the pupils, also indicating differences of beliefs surrounding child vulnerability. It would appear that the culture of Summerhill was not judged as a vehicle for improvement, unless improvement is defined as the changing of their culture by compulsory attending lessons. The drive for consistency between schools and wider state-provision would suggest problems of attendance would appear to be a 'school of thought' driven by the 'answers' offered by School Effectiveness ideas. It is interesting to reflect that Summerhill did not have an attendance problem. Simply, that as a boarding school where lessons were not compulsory, attendance was not a feature. To which the court appeal would not have changed Summerhillian culture but reinforced both their commitment to freedom of child to attend at child's discretion and a Neill-philosophy driven 'democratic' culture. Hopkins (1993) thinking concerning school improvement perhaps extends this filter and might be used for further analysis. He suggests that School improvement approaches to educational change embody the long term goal of moving towards the vision of the 'problem solving' or 'thinking' or 'relatively autonomous' school. Clearly, Summerhill is an autonomous

school, yet the parent and staff interview evidence suggests that whilst a review of practices was undertaken in light of the threat of OFSTED's Notice of Closure, the longer term goal for the school fundamentally lay with future avoidance of any spectre of adverse inspection.

The foundation of Neill's philosophy is the Summerhill-style preparation for life, rather than academic achievement, despite criticism for the vague ideology of such 'natural development' (Barrow, 1978). Individual attainment could be evaluated in terms of how well pupils reached or exceeded the standard expected for a typical pupil of that age. Whilst it recognised that for some schools, attainment would be low, the shift of importance would lie with the progress individuals make. Effectively, this might be a 'common-sense' reference to 'improvement'. Almost all pupils progress over time but their progress is not necessarily linear. Judgement about whether a pupil is making progress that is reasonable, good or poor should be made in relation to how well all pupils of similar prior attainment progress during the time.

Equally, if the sincere democratic principles of Summerhill are accepted, a triumph of the appeal case for childrens' rights is the agreement that future inspections will involve the children's opinions. However, it might also be concluded that this was further evidence that the inspection system was devised upon school effectiveness of the formal school and a democratic model might prove problematic since the OFSTED processes did not facilitate tools to address such occurrence.

## Conclusion

This paper explores and considers the extent to which inspection of an atypical independent school (Summerhill) is enabled to make appropriate judgements about that school. By considering the arguments for school improvement and effectiveness presented, questions to whether the processes undermined and constrained both the potential for improvement at

Summerhill. The discussion surrounding analysis of Summerhill as an ambiguity, collegial or democratic organisation equally presents thinking as to the inspection of organisations dependant upon their structure. Perhaps, this reinforces the steerage of a heretic model of inspection insofar as problems associated for inspecting democratic, collegial or ambiguous organisations may reflect an intention that 'effective schools' should be formal. The effective school as the goal would lead to the role of school improvement by inspection to possibly lead to restructuring 'poor' organisations. A possible conclusion then may have been that the theoretical model informing inspection of Summerhill has been inappropriate. Perhaps the outcome of the court judgement was to further 'put right' poor judgement. Another view, which may be taken from the analysis of the case, may lie with an argument that the judiciary failed. A key issue from the independent inquiry noted that should Summerhill have been closed then Summerhillian would not move to institutional educational provision but home learning. The defence that Summerhill provides learners the opportunities to benefit from learning within a community is suggested as preferable to the isolation of home learning. Whilst it should be recognised that home learning falls under the responsibility of the local authorty, it is then a matter for judgement as to whether this would be a destination for Summerhillians post-Summerhill. Further, value judgements as to whether home learning would be lesser provision than that judged by the inspectors of Summerhill circles around whether any duty to protect learners was failed by the appeal case ruling. Perhaps, there is a need for a guardian for Summerhill insofar as it offers alternative educational experiences.

One impact of the inspection lies with the regained confidence of Summerhill in its defeat of the inspection result at appeal. Perhaps, this 'confidence' can be further judged by Summerhill setting up of the AS Neill Summerhill Trust (EADT, 25 May 2004). It appears that the trust might not

solely lie with their commitment to Neill's philosophies but a new 'confidence' that the state might have to work with them on their terms as an alternative school, rather than their conceding to any threats of future inspection. The setting up of the trust is aimed at raising bursaries for Summerhill school fees for parents on lower incomes and to offer residential places for teachers. The new trust to promote the school possibly suggests that one concluding outcome from the inspection in terms of the appeal case was to assure Summerhill's sustainability, rather than raise its standards in school effectiveness terms. The inspection and subsequent appeal case may have acted as a Guardian of the right to offer Neill's doctrine simply because a lack of demand by parents might be the sole (democratic) judge of the school's effectiveness. Plainly, as an independent school it would not be able to financially sustain its provision if it could not satisfy its role of external accountability to the parental audience. Since the inspection the advent of the 'free school' has been developed by the conservative government across the UK, whilst each school differs in its aims perhaps the emergence of the importance of the voice of the child and the democratic element of schooling discussed herein have influenced this far further than the current UK government might reveal.

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*DOSSIER*

# 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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*DOSSIER*

# 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.

**Keywords:** Summerhill. Doing Nothing. Education.

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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.<br>+<br>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.<br>+<br>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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