

SUMMERHILL SCHOOL

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*Nobody connected with children can claim.
To know the true nature of childhood.
If they have not heard about
A.S. Neill's Summerhill School.
You may love the idea, or hate it.
But if you have your own children,
Have taught children, or have ever been a child.
One thing is for sure,
you will never view childhood or education in the
same way again . . .*

Zoë Neill Readhead

ABSTRACT:

Summerhill School was founded in 1921 at a time when the rights of individuals were less respected than they are today. Children were beaten in most homes at some time or another and discipline was the key work in child rearing. Through its self-government and freedom it has struggled for more than eighty years against pressures to conform, in order to give children the right to decide for themselves. The school is now a thriving democratic community, showing that children learn to be self-confident, tolerant and considerate when they are given space to be themselves. Summerhill School is one of the most famous schools in the world, and has influenced educational practice in many schools and universities. The democratic schools movement is now blossoming internationally, with many schools far and wide being based upon the philosophy of A. S. Neill or inspired by reading his books. Summerhill is a community of over a hundred people. About 95 of these are children aged between 5 and 18. The rest are teachers, house parents and other staff. It is situated in a large much loved, Victorian house and grounds, two miles from the east coast of Suffolk. Most of the children board during the term time, though there are day pupils as well. Usually as the younger ones grow older, they prefer to sleep at school. Summerhill is co-educational and enjoys the diversity of pupils from throughout the world. The oldest and most famous of these schools is Summerhill, on the east coast of England.

Key-words: Democratic School, Freedom, Co-educational.

Introduction

Summerhill was founded in 1921 by my father, A.S.Neill. It is the oldest children's democracy in the world. Since its foundation it has provided a rare place in the world where children can be themselves, make choices for themselves and live as equal members of a busy community.

The philosophy of the school is based on freedom for the individual. Freedom as opposed to licence. Summerhill is not only a school, it is also a pattern for life. Our aims could be described as the following:

*To allow children freedom to grow emotionally.

*To give children power over their own lives.

*To give children time to develop naturally.

*To create a happier childhood by removing fear and coercion by adults.

Quite naturally most educationalists and teachers are sceptical about a system like this. How can you give children power over their own lives? Are children to be trusted with this power? Can they be relied upon to make sensible decisions?

The answer is yes. Yes they can run their own school. Yes they can make sensible and compassionate decisions and yes they can be trusted to govern their own lives. There have been TV documentaries about our school and many articles in the press. The impression everybody likes to give is that it is an anarchic society full of unkempt, rowdy children with no manners and no thoughts about the feelings of others. Needless to say, this is not true.

If you were to walk into one of our school meetings and watch children of all ages listening, deciding and voting on issues such as bullying, stealing or noise you would see just how capable and serious the children can be about their freedom and decision making.

If you grow up in a system where you are treated with respect and you are aware that your opinion is valued, it naturally follows that you will bring injustices to the school meeting and also be well prepared to listen to, and judge the troubles of others. It is a system which encourages openness and honesty.

Our community is a group of approximately 100 people, adults and children. We are usually 14 staff and an international group of children. At the present time about half of the school are from abroad (South East Asia, Germany, USA, Switzerland and France) and half from the UK.

We are a self-governing community, which means that all the decisions regarding our daily lives in the school are made by the whole group. Our school decision making process is democratic, each adult and child having an equal vote. Thus the youngest child Joshua, age 5, has the same voting power as myself, principal of the school. Not only do the children have equal power in the school meetings, they also vastly outnumber the adults.

Most teachers reaction to this is one of fear - imagine what would happen in a conventional school if the pupils outnumbered the staff in a vote? Total anarchy? Loss of all moral codes?

Possibly - but in Summerhill because most of the pupils have been in the school for some time and have learned about decision making they are socially responsible and are used to thinking about the needs of the group rather than their own. This does not mean that we never have disputes or disagreements - one of the important things we have learnt here is that the needs of children and adults are very different indeed! What is important is that we all recognise these differences and try to negotiate a mutually agreeable solution

to any problem, instead of the adults making up the rules to suit themselves as they tend to do in society as a whole.

Occasionally we get rebellious children who want to break all the school laws and go against the community in whatever way they can. Sometimes such a child can whip up enough support to get some of the school laws dropped or changed. Obviously it can be a bit disruptive but it is a good learning experience and is quickly put right. What better way to learn to be a law abiding citizen than to try living without laws?

We believe in freedom but not licence. This means that you are free to do as you like - but you must not interfere with somebody else's freedom. You are free to go to lessons or stay away because that is your own personal business and you can make the choice. But you cannot play your drum kit at four in the morning because that would interfere with the freedom of others. Within this structure we probably have more laws than any other school in the country - about 190 at the last count! They range from what time you have to be in bed at night to where you are allowed to shoot bows and arrows.

Sometimes teachers bring up children for being unruly in class. One such case recently carried the fine that the culprit should be banned from lessons for three days - but the child appealed the fine on the grounds that it was too harsh!

Naturally the staff can be brought up too. It is a very humbling experience to be brought up before the whole community. - especially if you have been teaching in the conventional system where your authority was unchallenged. Summerhill teachers do not have any authority - they are seen as equals in the eyes of the community. Any respect they may have must be earned, just as the children have to earn it. We are all judged on what sort of people we are rather than on any age based criteria.

I think that all teachers should have the experience of teaching in a school like Summerhill where the children do not have to attend classes as most spend their entire working career teaching an audience that is forced to attend. It is a very different experience to teach children who can get up and walk out if they want to.

Of course the children understand that we have different roles. We are the responsible adults in a school and we have certain criteria that we must fulfil. They also respond to the differences in our ages and naturally make use of the adults wider experience of life. If there is an emergency they will run to the staff room for help, but they will also contribute in any way they can to help iron out the problem.

Next year Summerhill will be 87 years old. It has been through bad times and good times. It has been both favoured and derided by the world's media. There is something about this little group of people living on the east coast of England that society seems to find threatening. We have had to fight bad press, misleading television documentaries and government school inspectors who were blind to our methods and philosophy. Perhaps it is because Summerhill challenges the usual concepts of childhood and education, is prepared to take risks, gives children their childhoods to use as they will.

The community atmosphere at the school is very strong. To an extent it must be, wherever 100 people live in close proximity for over half the year, if there is not to be unbearable strain in their relationships. But it is fostered at Summerhill by the fact that all the inhabitants are considered equal members of the community. All are equally entitled to citizenship of the school - teachers, big kids, and little kids alike - and this is reflected in their interactions with each other. There is an ease of manner between equals that cannot exist in a hierarchy, however friendly and informal.

What makes the equality real rather than mere rhetoric is the meeting. Everyone knows, for instance, that a member of staff has no sanctions against a pupil that the pupil does not have against the member of staff - and that a teacher bringing a case against a

pupil is neither more nor less likely to succeed just because of the relative status of the people involved. Here, everyone has the same status.

Some people like to say that it is old fashioned and the idea is now out of date. But I think that until the people of the world understand the true nature of childhood and treat their children with the respect they deserve - Summerhill will continue to be a leader in the field of education, still a hundred years ahead of its time!



Summerhill School

Figure 1

Development

Summerhill was founded in 1921 in Hellerau, a suburb of Dresden. It was part of an International school called the Neue Schule. There were wonderful facilities there and a lot of enthusiasm, but over the following months Neill became progressively less happy with the school. He felt it was run by idealists – they disapproved of tobacco, foxtrots and cinemas – while he wanted the children to live their own lives. He said:

“I am only just realising the absolute freedom of my scheme of Education. I see that all outside compulsion is wrong, that inner compulsion is the only value. And if Mary or David wants to laze about, lazing about is the one thing necessary for their personalities at the moment. Every moment of a healthy child's life is a working moment. A child has no time to sit down and laze. Lazing is abnormal, it is a recovery, and therefore it is necessary when it exists.”



Alexander Neill

Figure 2



A. S. Neill and daughter Zoë (early 1950's)

Figure 3

Together with Frau Neustatter (later his first wife), Neill moved his school to Sonntagsberg in Austria. The setting was idyllic – a castle on top of a mountain – but the local people, a Catholic community, were hostile.

By 1923 Neill had moved to the town of Lyme Regis in the south of England, to a house called Summerhill where he began with 5 pupils. The school continued there until 1927, when it moved to the present site at Leiston in the county of Suffolk, taking the name of Summerhill with it.

Neill continued to run the school with Mrs Lins, as she was known, until the war required evacuation of the Leiston house and they moved to Ffestiniog in Wales. Mrs Lins became ill, requiring constant nursing, and eventually died. Neill later married a staff at the school, Ena Wooff – who had helped to nurse Mrs Lins as well as cooking and being a housemother at the school. After the war they returned to Leiston to a dilapidated Summerhill which had been used by the army and left in a poor state. Neill referred to this for many years afterwards, having to put much work into restoring the buildings and cleaning them up.

The school continued to be controversial, being depicted in the press as the "Do As You Please" school. Neill, however, did have the respect of many educationalists and well-known personalities such as, among others, Bertrand Russell and Henry Miller.

Pupil intake fluctuated over the years before taking a final dive in the late 50s. Things were looking black as the pupil numbers reached around 25. However, at that time Neill was approached by Harold Hart, a publisher from USA, who wanted to publish a compilation of Neill's books. Together they put the book 'Summerhill – a radical approach to childhood', on the market. It was an instant hit in the USA rising to the number one non-fictional best seller nationally. It was soon published in UK and many other countries and things began to take a turn for the better at Summerhill. Pupil numbers went up, many from the USA; interest in the school bloomed bringing in many visitors, to the dismay of the kids.

At times there were coach loads. After a time both Neill and the community became tired of the attention and withdrew into a time of comparative quiet. Neill lived out his days taking a less active part in the school but keeping in touch with what was going on. In 1973 his health declined and he was admitted to Ipswich Hospital. Later he was taken to the small local hospital where he died peacefully on September 23rd 1973. Five days later the new term started at Summerhill.

Ena Neill continued to run the school until her retirement in 1985 when their daughter Zoë, the current head teacher, took over.



Neill and Ena dancing on his birthday, 17/10/63 Figure 4

Summerhill has been running continuously since 1921 and has not changed fundamentally since it started. Its success in providing a happy environment for kids and producing well-balanced men and women, stands as a continuing proof of Neill's notion that 'The function of the child is to live his own life – not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows best.

Final considerations

Summerhill is a world-renowned school in England where pupils decide when and what they will learn. The school was established in 1921 by A. S. Neill, who was named by the Times Educational Supplement in 1999 as one of the twelve most influential educators of the 20th century. Known as ‘the oldest children’s democracy in the world’, Summerhill allows pupils to air their views, propose new school rules and construct future plans for life at the school at the regular school meeting.

The British educator Homer Lane has been the main influence of Alexander Neill. Neill believed that young people should be encouraged to learn in an environment where there was freedom and responsibility. Trade that every child has the right to freedom and that a group of children is self-governing, setting together own rule.

In Summerhill, children are not required to attend classes. The decisions are taken in the school assemblies where every vote, including teachers, students and officials. For Neill everyone should be free, however that does not significant a freedom without limits.

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Artigo recebido em 04/4/2008

Aprovado para publicação em: 16/06/2008