

How long at the crossroads?

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"We are anti-life and pro-death if we are pawns or politicians, merchants or exploiters. We are pawns because we were trained to seek life negatively, humbly fitting ourselves into an authoritative society, and ready to die for the ideals of our masters."

A.S. Neill, educational thinker and philosopher, and headteacher of the most renowned of all free schools, Summerhill, until his death at the age of 89 in 1973. His philosophy on education can be summed up in three words: "Follow the child". His condemnation of humanity was that it was always "anti-life", and always had been. We have to ask the question "Why haven't educational institutions in this country been able to follow the child? Why has the child followed the school?"

Neill adds: "Pro-life equals fun, games, love, interesting work, hobbies, laughter, music, dance, consideration for others, and faith in men. Anti-life equals duty, obedience, profit and power. Throughout history, anti-life has won, and will continue to win as long as youth is trained to fit into present-day adult conceptions."

Summerhill began as an experimental school in 1921 and, according to Neill, grew into a demonstration school, since it showed beyond all doubt that "freedom works". It continues today as an independent school, in the small town of Leiston, in Suffolk and has been run by his wife Ena since his death. He summarized the Summerhill philosophy as a school that produces "healthy, free children whose lives are unspoiled by fear and hate". He saw children's natural enthusiasm to learn and to live as the school's greatest asset, and the school exploited it. It is in the primary field of mainstream education that his views on schooling have had the greatest influence; however the degree to which Summerhill and Neill would ever be a major influence on the state system of education can be gauged by his description of his early days at the school:

"We set out to make a school in which we would allow children freedom to be themselves. In order to do this, we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction. We have been called brave, but it did not require courage. All it required was what we had - a complete belief in the child as a good, not an evil, being. For over forty years, this belief in the goodness of the child has never wavered; rather it has become a final faith."

In an interview later, Neill said that the next evolutionary step for the state sector of education, was to bring the same atmosphere into a comprehensive school that was already in a good primary school - "the freedom of choice and the freedom to move about".

Neill was never a libertine, advocating selfish indulgences for all who craved them; he always saw the development of the "free child" in the context of his or her community, and argued that if that child's actions were not actually harmful to anyone else, then they were acceptable. He did, of course, enjoy the luxury of living out his maxim, "follow the child", in an environment that was completely controlled, to a greater or lesser degree, by himself and the school staff, something that allowed him and his work colleagues to state from the beginning that the central aim of Summerhill School was "to make the school fit the child, instead of making the child fit the school".

So, to what degree can society's educators today fully exploit the too often hidden creative force inside a child, a life-force that wants to express imagination, explore new ideas, ask questions, to learn and to seek a direction for itself? Does society and its demands on what schools should be producing as an "educational experience" end up having an anti-educational effect on schools? Neill told Her Majesty's Inspectorate when they visited Summerhill: "Look here, you can inspect the teaching of English, or French or history, but you cannot inspect sincerity, freedom, charity or happiness."

Children have a finely tuned sense of justice which they develop out of the many injustices they see around them, or from those acted out on them. Neill wrote that a child is "innately wise and realistic". It seems to me that a child's sense of justice soon tells them what is on offer each day as they go into the classroom. The optimism and colour that surrounds the educational and social activities in most primary schools, contrasts starkly with the fundamental aims and objectives of all secondary-level schools - that is, the degree to which each child is going to be groomed for, and tested by, outside examination bodies, which are geared to higher education and the seeking of 'rewards' in society's workplace beyond.

On a scale of ten, measurement by examination success, I would suggest, is worth one; the other

aspects that go to make up a young person - personality, beliefs, aims, imagination, kindness, aggression - are worth the remaining nine. It seems that young people increasingly know - consciously or sub-consciously - their own "scale of ten".

As agencies of society, the universities, colleges and other institutions of further and higher education receive their small intakes on a basis that is selective, elitist, immoral, dubious and - for the young person - often psychologically damaging in later life. At the point of leaving secondary-level education a young person begins to realise that these 'higher' institutions have dominated the fundamental ethos of the school they have spent the previous five or seven years in, schools which in turn, base their own evaluation on competitive grades and examinations. The point is, that the vast majority of young people are told in no uncertain terms that most of what they understand to be their own strengths and weaknesses, their own make-up, their personality and character, is all worth very little in the whole scheme of things. Contrary to some beliefs, schools are a powerful force in a young person's life.

Surely the paradox facing all educators today is whether this local social service to which they often give their lives, is either "Education for society" or "Education for life". So far, it seems to me, schools have often been successful in educating children and young people 'for society' - but we have to ask, what kind of society? It takes little effort to see the inequalities and unfairness, the prejudices and discrimination, the absence in schools of any philosophically-based appraisal of life and society's priorities, and a general promotion for the individual to "seek all and get all". "Education for life" doesn't seem to carry much clout.

Which way will schools develop? One of the questions asked as we wait at the crossroads is whether or not we want schools to turn out independent free-thinking people with an awareness of themselves in the context of their community. Surely the aim is for young people to finish their experience of school and college, more interested in the responsibility of working towards a fairer and more equitable society, but fundamentally, that they have something to express, something to offer and, hopefully, who will strive to be happy.

Education's - and later society's - rewards may well include 'success' in material things and perhaps a higher standard of living, but all too often that seems to be as far as it goes. As Neill said, the economic solution alone will never free the world from its hate and misery, crime, scandal or neuroses and diseases. Meanwhile those who see the problem, and are concerned, are searching for proof of - and agreement on - the fundamental elements that are needed to give young people the ability to grow, and contribute and flourish.

It seems to me that the major task facing schools and educators today is how to extract themselves from the vice-like grip made up of two quite disparate forces in society today; on the one hand the education service is under extreme pressure to provide a local social service that is a salvation to society's ills - and it is being asked to do this while suffering from remorseless cuts in real expenditure inflicted by a Central Government committed to policies that imply a continued reduction in the quality and availability (not to mention importance) of local government funded services such as education, health, social services and housing. On the other hand, there is considerable disagreement as to what schools are actually for; there is a crisis of authority in many schools and more and more challenges to their legitimacy. In some areas, teachers have lost considerable confidence, but not because 'schooling' has become democratised and left teachers out in the cold - it has not. The elitist concepts of years gone by are still with us; comprehensive reorganisation of secondary-level schools was never given a running chance in this country, something which, in years to come, will be seen as the massive educational failure of the second half of the 20th century, in part a casualty of this country's obsessive adherence to past educational structures with their benefits (for the few) and disadvantages (for the many) that this has always entailed. In thinking of missed chances, it was, of course, a Labour-controlled Government that abysmally failed 20 years ago to really grasp the nettle of selection in education.

Perhaps the saddest part is that there are - and always have been - radical alternatives, which if looked at, listened to, and implemented, could help stop the 'comprehensive' education school system become obsolete before it is fully implemented. Some of the first moves might include obtaining teachers who have no fear, who give no fear, who have no dignity, who have no 'authority', and then for those schools to try some initial steps towards self-government. This could be followed by community, and particularly parental, involvement in the running and use of schools, along with their democratisation both internally and externally (including the provision of real choice and freedom for learners; parental control - or significant say - in the operation of school budgets and extending to a logical conclusion, the concept of local, community-based comprehensive schooling which reduces completely the selection of small minorities of children out of their local areas, for whatever reason that selection might be). Making instruction less formal and putting importance on the incidental and informal learning process is another step.

Neill and Summerhill have had their influence on the state system, and in some senses, they may have had their day; it is 12 years since his death and while his books are essential reading for thousands of young teachers coming through colleges the world over, his influence seems to have 'peaked' in this country some years ago now. A generation later, we wait for a new wisdom, a new awareness, a new sensitivity in the pedagogue, that will begin to carve out a more creative approach to tapping the natural and largely unused talents of young people in current educational settings. At the crossroads, where is that inspiration?

January, 1985

Postscript

What are schools for? A ray of hope ...

To end on an optimistic note ... There is a new piece of education legislation which only came into force in April 1983 - the 1981 Education Act - which has already been the catalyst in many primary and comprehensive

schools in this country to begin answering the question: "What are schools for?"

The irony is that this new law, which covers the education of children with special educational needs, was only designed to affect a very small minority of children. They are loosely known as the two per cent, or those children with clearly identifiable learning difficulties (such as blindness, mental impairment, physical disability), and a further 18 or 20 per cent with less severe learning difficulties.

The 1981 Education Act states for the first time ever in English education law that all such children shall now be educated in ordinary schools, and not continue to be placed in segregated special schools, which have always grouped children according to disability and then catered for them separately from the mainstream.

The process of educating children with and without special educational needs together in ordinary schools (whether it is for some or all of the time), is called integration. And the times when it has been most effective and appropriate for all concerned, are when ordinary schools choose to re-evaluate the whole educational and social 'package' on offer to all children and young people in the mainstream of education, and begin to develop a 'whole school approach' to their curriculum and social activities.

The optimistic note, then, is that studies of integration in practice across England and Wales, as well as North America, Scandinavia, Italy and Australia, show it to be the much needed catalyst to get ordinary schools to look at themselves in a broad sense. There are many positive and encouraging changes among ordinary school staff (and a few special school staff), among parents of 'ordinary' children and among the children themselves, to prove that integration can strengthen and enhance mainstream schools - not weaken or overload them, as many people believe to be the case.

Integration in education is inevitable in our society, and there are no logical lines to be drawn that would exclude children because of category, or severity of disability. It has now been clearly shown that there are two-way benefits for all concerned, and everyone ends up with a more realistic picture of the range of people that actually make up our society. In the end, integration has to be seen as a basic rights issue - that is, disabled children, like disabled adults, have the same fundamental right to opportunities for self-fulfilment as are enjoyed by others.

Integration is an uphill struggle in this country at present, primarily because of past attitudes that have lead to the systems and institutions that we have today. We have always segregated children who were 'different' and catered for them separately, choosing to argue that a concentration of resources (like staff and equipment), together with a concentration of children with apparently the same disability (like blindness), makes good educational sense.

The 1981 Education Act has banned the labelling of children like 'Educationally Sub-Normal (Severe)', 'physically handicapped', 'blind', etc. Instead children now have a 'learning difficulty'. The very concept of a separate special school for a minority of children is now questioned by this new law. And, of course, it follows that the traditional role of all ordinary schools is similarly questioned, since they will, increasingly, be taking in a client group hitherto excluded; excluded because of an attribute that was beyond their control.

Being 'educationally sub-normal', like the colour of our skin or having red hair, is not something that we can control. To be categorised, segregated and treated differently, and with fewer opportunities, is a denial of basic human rights.

My optimism for the education service is that the challenge is an exciting and positive one, and there is nothing else around to force a debate of the major issues, and the subsequent clarification of the principles on which to go forward, as integration.

The very small numbers of schools that have begun integration, are showing that the more frequently that non-disabled children and adults meet and relate to their disabled peers in ordinary settings, the greater chance there is of society accepting the normality of disability.

September 1986