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A. S. Neill on Democratic Authority: a lesson from Summerhill?

JOHN DARLING

ABSTRACT *Neill's philosophy of individual freedom has attracted world-wide attention, but there has been little discussion of its practical converse—individual responsibility and collective authority. Renouncing the powers normally invested in a headmaster, Neill instituted a system of community-based decision-making. This article explains the reasoning behind this arrangement and asks whether it made school life truly democratic. Mainstream education shows no interest in such matters. Democratisation is not seen as the kind of progressive reform which can be incorporated into a system of schooling where curricula are imposed and pupils are supposed to be kept under control. This approach to education is conventionally justified on the grounds that children are immature; but taking responsibility away from children is likely to make them immature.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent times there has been some significant movement of power in schools. First, headteachers have become less autocratic, and there is correspondingly greater participation by some teaching staff in the forming of school policies. Secondly, in the name of accountability there has been an increase in the power of parents, with some becoming school governors or members of school boards. Neither of these developments has altered the basic position of pupils. While teacher participation in management decisions is generally recognised as making a potent contribution to staff development, the learning potential inherent in participation has not been used to argue for the involvement of the pupil body. Instead, the call for more democratic schools has been interpreted as a demand for greater parent power; and this has effectively operated as a distraction from any consideration of the merits and benefits of legitimate pupil power. As a step towards reactivating such considerations, this paper examines the striking form of community control advocated by A. S. Neill.

"Summerhill is a self-governing school, democratic in form" [1]. Thus wrote Neill of the small, radical boarding school which he founded in England in 1924. Neill died in 1973, but Summerhill School is still running, much along the original lines. This discussion is based on what the school was like under Neill and draws on his own accounts of the school.

Neill claimed that children are innately wise and realistic. Clearly they are not. But (a) they are potentially wise and realistic, and (b) given an appropriate learning environment, they should become increasingly wise and realistic. It seems not unreasonable to argue that the exclusion of children from school government denies (a) and hinders (b). One might, of course, accept this kind of argument without feeling

committed to the total democracy which Neill saw himself as advocating. There may, after all, be greater or lesser capacity for taking responsibility among different children at different stages; and there would therefore be a case for having correspondingly more or less scope for decision-making. Certainly Neill could be criticised for giving children more freedom and power than they could reasonably be expected to handle. But whether or not the Summerhill arrangements were right, Neill hatched a vital idea: that being given the right to participate in community government is for the pupil both an educationally profitable experience and an important display of adult trust and confidence. But to understand the rationale for this, we must first turn to the underlying theory.

NEILL ON FREEDOM AND AUTHORITY

If asked to name a free school, many people would find Summerhill the first to come to mind. But what is the freedom that Neill's school exemplified? Neill did not countenance the idea of freedom without qualification. The child's every wish need not be granted: everyone has to recognise that there are limits to how far one can do what one wants. There is, says Neill, no such thing as complete freedom [2]. Such a notion conflicts with common sense, and those who purport to support it are an embarrassment to those who wish to advocate a more reasonable and realistic concept of freedom. It is clear that Neill had a horror of the spoiled child, especially where her spoiling was the result of deliberate policy based on a failure to grasp the difference between freedom and licence. This distinction between freedom and licence is developed by Neill in terms of the distribution of rights in different kinds of home environment [3]. The argument can be presented schematically like this:

Disciplined home	Parents have all the rights. Children have no rights.
Spoiled home	Children have all the rights. Parents have no rights.
Proper (free) home	Parents and children have equal rights.

What is involved in claiming equal rights for both groups may be open to debate. Neill made much of the point that when he told his young daughter not to bring sand into the parlour, he was doing so on the same basis as his daughter might tell him to get out of her bedroom [4]. However, it would seem that while Zoe was entitled to control entry to her own bedroom, her father was claiming jurisdiction over a larger number of rooms! But, whether or not this is justified, clearly equal territorial claims is not what is meant by equal rights. The view Neill was propounding was that children have rights in exactly the same way as adults: there is the same obligation to respect the rights of children as there is to respect the rights of adults. Thus Neill complied with his daughter's wishes in the same way as she complied with his. The fact of childhood affects neither the right nor the obligation to respect the right. It would not have been defensible for Neill to say: "I'm your father and therefore I'm entitled to overrule your wishes".

Neill's view of freedom strikes essentially the same note as John Stuart Mill's principle of liberty, though Neill never acknowledges any debt. But while Mill appears to deny that the principle applies to children [5], Neill thinks the same principle should apply to both children and adults.

Each individual is free to do what he likes *as long as he is not trespassing on the freedom of others*. [6]

Let me make it clear that I do not advocate libertinism. The test is always this: *Is what Mr X is doing really harmful to anyone else?* [7] (Neill's italics)

These two statements by Neill define the limit of acceptable behaviour in slightly different terms, but in a rough and ready way they point to the basic idea underlying the Summerhill approach to schooling. Neill maintained that whether or not a pupil learned anything was a matter for the pupil concerned and for no-one else. Whether or not a pupil threw stones was a matter for the community. Anyone might be affected by the throwing of stones, whereas the consequences of a pupil not learning impinged only on the pupil herself. (Clearly this last point is open to challenge, but this will not be pursued here.) So in Summerhill there were no rules about attending lessons, but there were rules governing social life: it was only in this second area that authority could legitimately be exercised.

Neill thus has no difficulty in accepting that authority has a legitimate place, albeit a restricted one. We now turn to the crucial question of what kind of authority is appropriate. To appreciate Neill's answer, we should first understand that he saw the job of education as the production of happiness. Neill believed that happiness in adult life was dependent on a happy childhood. Traditional approaches to education and to child-rearing induced unhappiness, and these had to be reversed. Centrally, this involved rejection of adult authority.

In Neill's theory, one of the problems created by adult-imposed requirements and rules of behaviour is that children fear they may be unable to conduct themselves in accordance with adult expectations. Consequently, children become anxious about the possibility of losing adult love and approval. If the rules are presented as moral rules, there is the additional psychic burden of guilt. Disturbed children, in Neill's view, are problem children. Problem behaviour implies bad parenting, and in Neill's eyes, all conventional parenting is bad.

As well as producing anxiety, the exercise of authority is held to foster hatred. The child hates being restricted, thwarted and suppressed. She hates the person who is responsible both for curbing her and for punishing her if she revolts. The fact that children may not think they hate their parents can be easily accommodated in Neill's theory: children cannot *afford* to recognise such hatred. The emotion therefore gets driven underground, or is converted into 'unconscious' hatred, but it remains a potent force which may re-emerge in suitable, safe circumstances. This mechanical model of emotional force, clearly derived from Freud, is used to explain (and to explain away) the bullying of little children by bigger children. And the exercise of parental discipline can itself be accounted for in these terms. The punishment of children by adults involves accumulated hatred-in-action. In Neill's view, if parents could become aware of this (perhaps by reading Neill's writing?) they would stop disciplining their children. Further, the disciplining of children produces not just hatred of the discipliner, but also self-hatred in the child. This is because teaching a child to be good generally conveys the message that what she wants is wrong or bad. In effect this means teaching her to hate her inclinations, and, to that extent, to hate herself.

Parents thus function in Neill's scheme of things as the causal explanation of why some children are neurotic or full of hate; and the explanation of parents' failures in child-rearing is given in pretty unflattering terms. Their authoritarian methods are variously attributed to power drives, to fear of the boss, to unsatisfactory sex-lives, as

well as to hatred of self or others. The apparently limitless sympathy and tolerance which Neill extends to the misdemeanours of children is quite absent from his discussion of parents. Seldom does he acknowledge the difficulties under which parents can labour. He does, however, suggest that teachers are better placed to make a good job of child-rearing because, without the complication of strong emotional ties, they can achieve a clearer understanding. And ultimately Neill declares that perhaps individual parents should not be held to account, but that erroneous approaches to dealing with children are symptomatic of the sickness of our culture as a whole. He affirms:

There is never a problem child; there are only problem parents. Perhaps it would be better to say that *there is only a problem humanity*. [8] (Neill's emphasis)

To turn now to a different kind of consequence, adult control and direction of children's lives is seen as having a debilitating effect: instead of empowering children, it makes them less capable of making their own decisions. The absence of adult authority at Summerhill, in Neill's view, means that pupils learn how to handle freedom and how to take responsibility for their conduct and their learning. As far as the fostering of learning is concerned, this approach may be seen as a high-risk strategy. Not everyone managed to assume such responsibilities to their own satisfaction, as can be seen from these two revealing expressions of regret from former pupils [9]:

I was quite unable to read at Summerhill, and when I was young I was quite self-conscious about it. When I left I could muddle through, but I couldn't pick up a book and read it from cover to cover. I'm OK on reading now . . .

Academically Summerhill failed me abysmally: I've still got a mini-chip on my shoulder about not having a degree.

But for Neill, academic attainment was not the highest priority: it was certainly not worth the cost of the psychic scars inflicted by an imposed curriculum. On the other hand, it might be argued that those who *were* able to respond to the challenge of being thrown back on to self-motivation probably underwent an experience that was a more useful preparation for university education than could be provided by traditional schooling. But again, this is not a prime consideration for Neill.

Much more important was that we should recognise that what all children need is the knowledge and assurance that the adult is 'on their side', a phrase which Neill acquired from Homer Lane, a pioneer of the self-governing juvenile community. The mere absence of adult authority is not enough: something more positive is required. Children need unconditional love and approval; and in a social setting where there is no pressure to conform to any adult expectations, there is seen to be no risk of losing adult support. The no-adult-authority policy is itself a silent declaration that adults accept the children as the individuals that they are. According to Neill pupils who came to Summerhill brought with them standard assumptions that teachers were your enemies, that they sought to thwart your wishes, and that they were legitimate targets for physical or mental warfare. Neill went to some lengths to dispose of such misconceptions as is revealed through a series of episodes which he recounts. On one occasion a new boy tricked Neill by impersonating his (the pupil's) mother phoning to ask Neill to give her son a sum of money [10]. Once Neill tumbled to the ruse, he went to see the boy and told him that his mother had phoned a second time asking that he be

given a further sum which Neill duly handed over. This exercise served the purpose of showing that while Neill knew he had been deceived, he was prepared to join in the charade and bore no grudge.

Similarly, if a new pupil started throwing mud at a door which Neill had just finished painting, Neill says he would join in the mud-slinging [11]. There is no pretence on Neill's part that he would enjoy doing this, but such tactics seemed to him to be necessary to achieving the all-important objective of convincing the pupil that Neill was on her side. With an established pupil, the fact that she requires no such convincing explains why Neill advocates an alternative kind of response: swearing at the mud-slinger. Again the directness and openness of such a response commends it to Neill: there is no guilt-inducing moralising, and no assumption of superiority. Thus, in protesting against children walking across his seed-beds or pulling up his potato plants, Neill sees himself as vigorously asserting his own rights in just the same way as a child can ban the use of her bicycle by others. Both are instances of an individual defending her interests against others. From this it will be clear that Neill's ideas on getting rid of adult authority do not commit him to putting up with children abusing him or destroying his property, though there may be occasions when these things need to be tolerated for strategic reasons. Far from advocating permanent calm through all provocations, Neill approves of direct and robust confrontation with children when this seems necessary.

This article started by demonstrating that Neill accepted the need for authority. It has now shown why he rejected the authority of adults. What is the alternative?

In Summerhill authority was exercised by the community through weekly meetings of the whole school; hence Neill's description of the school as 'democratic'. Pupils and teachers had one vote each. These meetings had two main functions: one was to formulate rules governing social behaviour; the other was to consider complaints about those who transgressed the rules. Transgressors could be punished by being confined to the school grounds, being sent to bed early, missing a trip to the cinema, or forfeiting their pudding or a week's pocket money.

According to Neill, children in this situation showed a keen sense of justice. The punishments were invariably reasonable and lenient, and were accepted without resentment. The conducting of such meetings by a different chairperson every week developed pupils' administrative skills, provided experience in public speaking, and compelled people to see the other person's point of view. "In my opinion", wrote Neill, "one weekly General School Meeting is of more value than a week's curriculum of school subjects" [12].

Film made of these meetings certainly suggests a high level of participation. If the discussions do not always exhibit the quiet orderliness beloved of conventional schools, neither do they seem to degenerate to the level of proceedings in the democratic House of Commons. A recent account [13] by a member of staff describes the meetings as 'dynamic, animated' affairs.

People listen carefully to cases, offer insights and proposals on what might be done to resolve the situation or curtail a certain activity . . .

. . . The conflict is rational and not based in a power struggle, so the response is rational.

The rest of this paper examines the adequacy of the Summerhill approach to self-government, and considers what light it sheds on the world of mainstream schooling.

LIMITATIONS OF SUMMERHILL'S DEMOCRATIC AUTHORITY

How satisfactory is Neill's conception of a 'self-governing democracy'? We have noted his concern for equality expressed both in terms of equal rights for children and adults, and as equal participation for pupils and staff in law-making. But while Neill made much of the fact that every pupil and every teacher (Neill included) had one vote each, the first thing that is questionable is his apparent assumption that the Summerhill community should be seen as consisting of these two groups to the exclusion of others.

In the context of democratic decision-making there is no mention of the young, female school cleaners. Neill is somewhat embarrassed and apologetic about their role as employees, but sees them (and by extension, the school) as benefiting from the experience of Summerhill freedom.

In a free atmosphere where they are not bossed, they work harder and better than maids do who are under authority. [14]

We will not explore here the coherence of the claim that these women are not under authority. What needs to be noted is that their work is directly affected, for good or ill, by other people's behaviour: tidy pupils make cleaning easier. On this criterion, cleaners would seem to have a good claim to a voice in school government.

As well as the fact that suffrage does not appear to have been universal, there is also a *prima facie* case for suspecting that, even among those who did have a vote, power was unequally distributed. Teachers, after all, are not just older and more experienced than children; they are highly educated. It is reasonable to suppose that in discussion they will be more articulate and that they could be more subtly persuasive than most pupils. Neill argued that this danger could be discounted on the grounds that Summerhill pupils are never overawed; but while fearlessness might help to counteract overt pressure, it offers no defence against less visible forms of persuasion. And adults are often simply unaware of the extent to which they use artful manipulation.

More specifically, it has sometimes been suggested that Neill himself was bound to exercise undue influence. Pupils would, after all, be aware that he was famous, and that they would not be attending the school but for the fact that parents held Neill's views in high regard. The school's philosophy was Neill's philosophy; its ethos was determined by Neill. He devised the basic framework which included a morning of timetabled (but optional) classes. Even the democratic arrangement for government by the community was instituted by Neill. In this sense, Neill clearly exercised great influence over the school.

But in the school meetings, Neill seems to have exercised restraint. Many of the outcomes of discussion were probably of little concern to him personally; he was more committed to the value of the process. Where the discussion did affect his own interests, he was sometimes overruled, as he is at pains to point out. Neill failed, for example, to have a ban imposed on swearing in the hearing of prospective parents when they were visiting the school! He was also defeated when proposing that pupils under 16 be forbidden to smoke [15].

An interesting documentary record of Neill being overruled is provided by a television film made by the BBC [16]. The television crew wanted to film the scene at the school swimming pool (where bathers have the freedom to wear costumes or not to wear them as they see fit). Neill was unhappy about shots of naked adolescents at play being transmitted into people's sitting rooms, and decided that a ruling should be given by the school meeting. The meeting itself was filmed by the television crew; Neill can

be seen arguing that the British public was not enlightened enough to accept what they would see and that there might be a wave of critical opinion which would harm Summerhill. Pupils argued that the film should offer a truthful, frank and comprehensive record of Summerhill life. The film then shows Neill being outvoted: the next shot shows the swimming pool!

Yet Neill could make quite autocratic decisions as appears from his own writing:

I forbid strong drink in my school. [17]

I am always anxious when a craze for wooden swords begins. I insist that the points be covered with rubber or cloth . . . [18]

In his writing, Neill defends such prohibitions in the name of common sense. Similarly, this time invoking safety considerations, Neill had no hesitation in banning children from climbing on the school roof or cycling outside the school grounds. He saw this kind of veto as an expression of natural human concern, rather than as a manifestation of authority. Neill is quite open about some elements of managerial power:

. . . there are some aspects of school life that do not come under the self-government regime. My wife plans the arrangements for bedrooms . . . I appoint teachers and ask them to leave if I think they are not suitable. [19]

Each of these reserved powers will now be considered in turn.

First, the domestic arrangements. Why, it might be asked, should pupils not collectively sort out their own bedroom arrangements so that, as far as possible, groups who want to sleep together can do so? Does Neill fear the outcome of such decisions? Although Neill objected to society's taboo on youthful sex, when a girl pupil and a boy pupil asked for a bedroom to themselves, this was refused by Neill on the grounds that any resultant scandal might mean that the school would be closed down [20]. On these grounds he declared the issue to be an economic one rather than a moral one [21]. 'The interests of the school', however, seems a curiously traditional consideration for a radical institution since this notion could easily be invoked to ban any radical practice whatever. Neill argued that the school's well-being would not have been given proper weight by the particular people requesting a shared bedroom, since both pupils concerned had only recently arrived at Summerhill. (Neill believed that young people reared in the unrepressed atmosphere of Summerhill would not engage in sex—a view at once curious, comforting, and presumably false.) But in any case the lovers' alleged lack of commitment to the interests of Summerhill seems largely irrelevant. If the rest of the community *did* have this commitment (and that is what Neill's comments suggest) then they should have been allowed to regulate matters affecting the school's interests including pupil cohabitation. Neill's retention of the right to control bedroom allocation shows only limited confidence in the democratic process.

Secondly, the appointment of teachers. Once when Neill was under pressure from Summerhill teachers to change his traditional timetabling arrangements, this was discussed, at Neill's own suggestion, at the weekly meeting [22]. Yet if timetabling of subjects is a legitimate concern of pupils, no less is the appointment of those who will teach them. One recent argument in favour of pupils making such appointments suggests that if pupils were to make a mistake they would just have to rectify it [23]. In mainstream schools this would not be easily accomplished, since even the poorest teachers generally manage to stay in post once appointed; but, as we have seen, Summerhill retained and exercised the right to fire teachers. They were appointed by

Neill on a trial and error basis: "Let's see how you get on with children", Neill said to one prospective member of staff [24]. In fact, Neill's appointment procedures seem to have been casual, if not positively whimsical; and he had great difficulty in bringing himself to get rid of teachers who proved unsuitable. So, even at the *ad hominem* level one could argue that involving pupils in making staff appointments would have been at least as satisfactory as leaving the job to Neill.

What we have seen here is that equal voting rights do not entail equal power. The most significant limitation of Summerhill democracy lies in Neill's power to determine the extent of the school meeting's competence. While it is true that the powers enjoyed by the Summerhill community totally eclipse the trivial level of decision-making entrusted to pupil committees in some mainstream schools, Neill nevertheless remained Summerhill's proprietor and acted as such. It has been suggested that it would have been reasonable for the community to have appointed the staff. If there had been real democratic power, the community would have *demand*ed the right to make such appointments. After all, the appointment of new teachers affects everyone's interests at least as much as the throwing of stones.

One further point remains. Given Neill's views on the harmfulness of adult authority, it is natural that not only Neill but other teachers should divest themselves of authority. How far does the Summerhill system of collective authority provide an adequate substitute? The school meeting functions both as a parliament (framing laws) and as a court (adjudicating on complaints and punishing offenders). What it does not provide is a substitute for the policeman's role of stopping antisocial behaviour from occurring or taking immediate action if it does, traditionally important tasks for both class teachers and headteachers. This issue is never identified or discussed by Neill, and the observations that follow are inferences based on relevant episodes in Neill's accounts of life at Summerhill.

The general line seems to be that individuals have to be prepared to defend themselves. We have noted that Neill is quite prepared to deal abruptly with someone who abuses his garden or a freshly painted door. But Neill, as an older and more experienced individual, is well equipped to protect his own patch. What if the behaviour is too awkward for an individual to handle? We can see that Neill effectively recognises that there are such situations because he describes how he felt the need to intervene when a young boy at Summerhill was terrorising other children. Neill's account of what developed is worth noting. When he spoke to the boy, Neill was kicked and bitten. So the child was informed that any further assault would be met with retaliation. Although it seems that Neill confined himself to hitting the child rather than kicking and biting him, the procedure had the desired effect. Neill concludes:

This was not punishment. It was a necessary lesson: learning that one cannot go about hurting others for one's own gratification. [25]

It is interesting to compare this with another passage in Neill's reflections in which an imaginary parent sticks a pin into an infant because the infant stuck a pin into the baby. Despite some apparent similarity with the previous case, Neill objects to the parent's action on two grounds. First, there is, says Neill, no real addition to the infant's understanding. Secondly, while the baby may be saved from suffering further attacks, the damage inflicted on the infant may not be readily undone [26].

One striking feature of Neill's comments on such antisocial behaviour is that his concern is often for the wrong-doer rather than for those who suffer because of her behaviour. For those who have to manage a social group, like a class or a school, this

can seldom be the top priority—for it is important to ensure that everyone's rights are respected as they go about their legitimate business even if this involves the vigorous control of those whose behaviour disrupts this framework. Neill is aware of this conflict, yet he is usually prepared to see a certain amount of unpleasantness being created for the inhabitants of Summerhill rather than stop antisocial behaviour by heavy-handed intervention. It is noteworthy that if the sufferer is an adult Neill generally seems unconcerned and confines himself to worrying about the damage that might be done to the children if made to desist from inconsiderate actions. When recalling how Summerhill children continued to make a lot of noise despite the fact that they knew a female member of staff was ill, Neill confines himself to reflecting that we adults are much too ready to force on children patterns of behaviour that are convenient to us [27]—so it seems that the poor lady just had to suffer!

'Sticking up for oneself' is a useful skill, and one unlikely to be acquired when living under a high level of protection. Yet it has to be recognised that some are disadvantaged when it comes to self-defence. Babies certainly come into this group, and so do the sick: they have to have their rights defended by others. The sick teacher could subsequently have taken action against the thoughtlessly noisy children through the Summerhill court; but she could not have got instant protection from the Summerhill police-force because none exists. The nearest equivalent appears to be the 'bedtime officers' whose job (taken in rotation by pupils) was to chase children to bed—but this practice was, characteristically, defended by Neill on the grounds that exhaustion is a health hazard rather than because late nights are associated with antisocial behaviour.

SCHOOLING AND SELF-GOVERNMENT

While Summerhill democracy may have been flawed, at least there was a real attempt to institute democratic decision-making. Few schools have been tempted into trying this seriously.

One documented exception in the State system is a comprehensive secondary school in Leicestershire which succeeded in developing democratic structures but which was less successful in promoting the exercise of democratic rights. In conversation with a researcher, one of the teachers from this school argued that:

The more a student takes responsibility for studying, the more a student will need a voice in determining the conditions of study. [28]

But while the legitimacy of the pupil voice was recognised, actual student participation seems to have been minimal. Some complained that the meetings were too large, the proceedings too complex, and the discussions too difficult to follow. Some pupils were just not interested, while others themselves doubted whether it was proper for them to have a part in decision-making.

By contrast, on the other side of the Atlantic a very positive account can be found of Brookline's School Within a School (SWS) "where students share authority with teachers over a remarkably wide range of decisions". SWS, however, constitutes an alternative track within a conventional American high school: hence, as Amy Gutmann observes, pupils "probably enter SWS with a commitment—or at least a predisposition—to participation" [29].

To attempt a direct transplant of a successful Summerhill policy into mainstream schools would be to ignore some crucial differences: it would be simplistic to assume that what works in one institution would necessarily be feasible in others. Few schools,

after all, recruit pupils exclusively from families where reasoned debate and decision-making are encouraged (or are even possible); and few schools seem small enough for whole-school discussion. But if such considerations show why Summerhill has never seemed a convincing model, they do not demonstrate that democratic practices would be inappropriate or unworkable in mainstream schools. Family background is certainly relevant; but schools have often seen themselves as able (and entitled) to improve on the culture of local families where this appears to be in the educational interests of children. And in schools which are much larger than Summerhill, it could be argued that the place for democratic decision-making is in smaller groups within the school, perhaps at classroom level. Or it might be that democratic power would be better exercised through a small number of elected representatives. It is, however, worth noting that the House of Commons provides for debate and decision-making by 650 participants all assembled in one hall (at least when they are not truanting).

We must also remember that many of the changes that have actually taken place in Coketown Secondary in recent decades would have been previously regarded as totally unrealistic proposals: the abolition of corporal punishment, the humanising of teacher-pupil relationships, the catering for individual differences, the use of discovery methods and experiential learning. All of these are now features of much mainstream education when 60 years ago they were to be found in only a handful of progressive schools. The one part of the progressive school programme of the 1920s and 1930s which has not been pursued is the demand for democratic government: and this is still not seen as worthy of serious consideration.

To account for the continued quiet neglect of this idea, this section has so far highlighted some differences between Coketown Secondary and Summerhill School. This approach suggests, however, that the non-implementation of the democratic principle is the result of a rational review of relevant circumstances when in fact the basic problem may be that the principle is too much of a challenge to our fundamental assumptions about the education of the young. The justification of compulsory schooling must be based, at least partly, on the belief that there are certain things that ought to be learned or skills that ought to be acquired. It is true that on the fringes of schooling pupils seem to be allowed some scope for negotiating individual curricula. One place where this is likely to be found is in nursery and infant classes where such a pedagogical strategy reflects a widespread commitment to the ideology of progressive individualism. The other stage is at the top end of secondary schooling where notions of common curricula give way to the concept of 'subject choice': which subjects, and even how many, may be determined by the perceived need and aptitude of individual pupils. In the 1990s, however, the notion of an externally-determined common curriculum is clearly going to be firmly reinstated, and with it the assumption that the teacher must be invested with maximum authority, or legitimated power. After all, the teacher, as society's delegate, is there to ensure that—as far as is humanly possible—children do actually learn what they are all expected to learn. Curriculum implies power; and if the curriculum is central to our school system, so too is power.

What seems to have happened, then, is that mainstream schooling has adopted (to a greater or lesser extent) those ideas of the early educational progressives which are compatible with the maintenance of pedagogical power. Rousseau himself argued long ago that child-centred and liberal teaching strategies could actually *enhance* this power:

There is no subjection so complete as that which preserves the forms of freedom: it is thus that the will itself is taken captive... His (the pupil's) work and play... are they not, unknown to him, under your (the teacher's)

control? No doubt he ought only to do what he wants, but he ought to want to do nothing but what you want him to do. [30]

What is also significant is that the kind of child-centred educational theory that has proved acceptable to schools is derived not so much from Neill as from Rousseau, Piaget and others who stress the *limitations* of children's understanding. This fits in with the common-sense perception, endemic in our culture, of children as rather silly and immature, unfit to be given responsibility. Yet such a view is clearly in danger of being self-confirming: for where children are seen as silly and immature, they will not be given responsibility; and where they are not given responsibility, they are likely to remain silly and immature. More particularly, we in education have the (often unrecognised) power to create children who will confirm our own prejudices about them. What this shows is that the child-centred theorist's purported strategy of determining objectively the nature of children as a base from which to infer the optimal approach to children's education is unrealisable. To an extent at least, children are how we treat them, and, more fundamentally, how we see them. Children are themselves likely to acquire the view of children which prevails in society—hence, perhaps, the feeling among Leicestershire pupils that it was inappropriate for them to have a participant voice in their own schooling.

Schooling is, and has been at least since it became compulsory, a way of insulating young people from the world of work. It is also an important mechanism for stopping young people from growing up, in the phraseology of today's society, 'too quickly'. It is not entirely clear why tardy development should be seen as a virtue, but it seems likely that one reason for disliking rapid maturation is that this upsets our low-level expectations of what is possible. Because our society has these low-level expectations, it is entitled to treat children with an enveloping paternalism, which in turn fosters the infirm condition previously assumed. From this stems much of the scepticism surrounding democracy in schools. To challenge this scepticism, we may develop an argument, suggested in Eamonn Callan's (1988) *Autonomy and Schooling* [31], which I shall call 'Callan's fork'.

In considering the appropriateness of school democracy, the nature of children is fundamental. For the purposes of the argument, we may consider two possible, if extreme, positions. First, there is a positive and optimistic view: children are (to use Neill's terms) wise and realistic. On this view there can be no good grounds for failing to include them in the decision-making process. The second possibility is to claim that children are generally lacking in good sense, and to conclude that schooling should proceed undemocratically as before. But if this dismal condition is generally true of pupils in schools, then surely, Callan argues, there must be something radically wrong with the schooling process as traditionally conceived: is it not likely that the cause of pupils' lack of good sense lies in their endless subjection to other people's well-meant decisions? If so, paternalism should be replaced by democracy. In Callan's fork, whichever premise you start from, you finish up with the same conclusion.

POSTSCRIPT

Summerhill democracy is now in its seventieth year. But the Leicestershire comprehensive referred to earlier ran down its democratic procedures in 1985. In an internal school document, the principal affirmed the need for 'tight control at the centre' [32].

Much of the current talk of school management suggests a political climate which is inimical to the development of school democracy. It seems that Summerhill may remain a lonely reminder that there are other ways. If nothing else, the particular concern of this essay nicely illustrates how the pursuit of efficiency and value-for-money may be self-defeating. If participation in collective decision-making fosters maturity, promotes personal development, and is as educative as Neill supposed, then while 'tight control from the centre' may make schools run more smoothly, it may also make schools less effective in promoting their proper aims.

NOTES

- [1] NEILL, A.S. (1968) *Summerhill*, p. 53 (London, Penguin).
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 309.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- [5] See MILL, J.S. (1962) *Utilitarianism; On Liberty; Essay on Bentham*, p. 135 (London, Collins/Fontana).
- [6] NEILL, *op.cit.*, p. 143.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 299.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 101–102.
- [9] In CROALL, J. (1983) *Neill of Summerhill: the permanent rebel*, p. 404 (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- [10] NEILL, *op.cit.*, p. 204.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- [13] APPLETON, M. (1990) Self-government at Summerhill, *Friends of Summerhill Trust Journal*, 5, pp. 12–16.
- [14] NEILL, *op.cit.*, p. 31.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- [16] BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION (1968) *Summerhill Swimming Pool* (film), available from Concord Films, Ipswich.
- [17] NEILL, *op.cit.*, p. 317.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- [20] NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA (1966) *Summerhill* (film), available from Concord Films, Ipswich.
- [21] NEILL, *op.cit.*, p. 64.
- [22] CROALL, *op.cit.*, p. 330.
- [23] CALLAN, E. (1988) *Autonomy and Schooling*, p. 330 (Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press).
- [24] CROALL, *op.cit.*, p. 204.
- [25] NEILL, *op.cit.*, p. 153.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- [28] GORDON, T. (1986) *Democracy in One School? Progressive Education and Restructuring*, p. 63 (Lewes, Falmer Press).
- [29] GUTMANN, A. (1987) *Democratic Education*, p. 89 (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).

[30] ROUSSEAU, J.-J. (1911) *Emile*, translated by B. Foxley, p. 146 (London, Dent).

[31] CALLAN, op.cit.

[32] GORDON, op.cit., p. 244.

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