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Can our Public Schools be "Progressive?"

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CAN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS BE "PROGRESSIVE?"

Sharon Coe
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CWesley

CAN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS BE "PROGRESSIVE?"

Summerhill School, founded in England by A. S. Neill in 1921, has caught the public eye as one of the better examples of a "progressive" school. By "better" I do not mean that his ideas are necessarily better, but he has probably been able to put more of his ideas into action than most radical educators, and this school is one of the more widely known of the "progressive schools."

A. S. Neill is the headmaster of this school although a visitor to the grounds might not be able to tell, if he bases it on the amount of respect shown to Mr. Neill. For instance, only the very newest students ever address him as "Mr. Neill." He is just "Neill", and his vote counts no more than anyone else's at the regular school meetings.

Mr. Neill has made every attempt to make Summerhill a place where a child can grow up to be himself with no "conditioning" from a society whose values are all mixed up.. The school is a complete democracy. The children make all their own laws as well as punishing the offenders by having them forfeit pocket-money, pay for damages done, make apologies, do extra work, or other punishments suited to the crime. There is also a system by which the child may appeal if he feels he has been unjustly punished.

Originally, I wanted to decide in what ways, if any, Summerhill principles can be used in our present education system. Then I realized that Summerhill is not intended to be an education-factory

as our schools are. It is intended more as a society in which the children can be free to grow up without conditioning. It would do little good to change just the curriculum of our public schools if the basic ideas of the community as a whole did not agree with this type of child-rearing. In this age of science and technology it would be very hard for a parent to forego a bit of knowledge for his child for a lot of happiness for him. The success achieved by the Soviet Union in education is spoken of by Erich Fromm.

There [the Soviet Union] the old-fashioned methods of authoritarianism are applied in full strength; and the results, as far as knowledge is concerned, seem to indicate that we had better revert to the old disciplines and forget about the freedom of the child.¹

I should add that he does go on to explain that the public idea of progressive education has not been an idea of freedom, but of "sugar-coating the pill," through use of persuasion. For this reason, he says that progressive education has never been as successful as it should have been.

Neill himself says that it is almost impossible to use Summerhill principles to any great extent in public schools. Until authorities and the general public can be convinced that his method is better than the standing system (which is debatable) the progress that can be made toward this system is just what an individual teacher who believes in Summerhill principles is willing to do.

Summerhill is not just a new curriculum--it is a complete concept regarding children. The most basic concept in Neill's plan is freedom--freedom to choose what classes to go to, if any,

¹Erich Fromm, forward to Summerhill, (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1960) p. ix.

freedom to choose what to do with pocket-money, freedom to decide about religion, freedom to say what they think.

An individual teacher believes his students should have a right to discuss a subject freely--to say what they think. The discussion gets rather noisy and the teacher is cautioned by the administration that he must keep "discipline" in the classroom. Free children are not quiet children.

Most parents want to put their children in one end of an "education machine" and have them come out at the other end knowing all the basic facts about math, science, geography, history and English. Suppose the child doesn't like math, geography, history, or English and doesn't want to study anything but science: "but he doesn't know what's best for him. He'll thank us later that we made him get a well-rounded education" would be the immediate reaction from most parents. According to Neill, a child should not be forced to study any subject that he is not interested in when the child would be much happier outside playing. He says a child will work willingly if he can see sense in it himself. Neill has many examples in his school of kids who have not been to a class in years, and, at the age of fifteen or so, decide that they want to pass the stiff entrance exams and go to college. In many cases these students have, of their own accord, learned in two years what it takes most public schools six or seven years to teach and pass the college entrance exams. The problem comes when adults try to force a child to do what the adult "thinks" is best for the child. If the child cannot see any reason for doing it, he will only do it out of a feeling of fear or guilt, and he will not be happy doing it. A teacher in our public school

system cannot tell a child that he does not have to study a certain subject just because he has no interest in it. This teacher would surely be fired. Yet this is one of the principles of Summerhill. Parents (not to mention school boards) would rise up in arms if this were tried in a public classroom. About the only thing an individual teacher can do is to try to teach the subject in such a way as to create an interest in the subject for the student so that he will enjoy studying it and to try to show him some good reasons why he should bother to learn it. If a teacher cannot do this, he might seriously consider whether or not the subject should be taught or not.

It would be hard to convince school boards and parents to let their schools operate on a completely democratic basis. The very idea of letting a child decide anything for himself scares most adults to death. Most families and schools are operated on the theory that adults always know what is best for the child. Neill operates on the theory that happiness is the most important goal in rearing a child, and if the child himself is free to choose what he wants to do, he will usually be happier in the decision than if some adult had made the decision for him.

To put public schools on a democratic basis would require literally an act of congress, but an individual teacher can try to show a sense of justice in his classroom. He could let the class vote on matters that pertain only to their class and do not affect the rest of the school.

Neill says "Freedom is ALL OR NOTHING; you can't have freedom and guidance together. . ." ² Thus, the only effective way

²A. S. Neill, Freedom--Not License!, (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1966) p. 184.

to use his concepts is to re-do the entire education system.
An individual teacher can only give his kids one break from
the drudgery and one year, or one period a day cannot undo all
the conditioning a child has had.