

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Other Education in Practice

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Introduction *I worked for almost thirty years at Dartington Hall School, and after it closed for a further four years at Sands School. When I retired in 1992 I believed that Sands and Summerhill were the only two democratic schools left. Most of the people I talked to about education had never heard of Dartington or Sands, and thought Summerhill, as a private school outside the state system, was irrelevant. In this piece I describe how, when I had time to travel, I learnt how wrong we all were.*

When Dartington Hall School was closed, a group of about fourteen Dartington students asked three staff, of whom I was one, to set up a new school on the same model. Together we set up Sands School, a democratic secondary school which now has around seventy students. To me it seemed as though we were maintaining principles which we shared with no one except Summerhill.

A year or two later Alison Stallybrass, the author of *Being Me and Also Us*, a history of the Peckham Experiment, told me I should investigate Sudbury Valley, in

Massachusetts, a school of which I had never heard. I wrote to Dan Greenberg, one of the founders, and he arranged with Yaacov Hecht of the Democratic School of Hadera, that I bring a small group from Sands School to attend a big conference in Jerusalem in the summer of 1993, called *Education for Democracy in a Multicultural Society*. There were some lively sessions organised by the Adam Institute for Democracy and Peace, which works for cooperation between Arabs and Israelis, and we gave our presentation about Sands School. We were usefully prompted by Dan Greenberg from the audience, but otherwise the speakers were nearly all politicians or academics. Yaacov Hecht saw then and there that something important was missing. He decided that we must have a select conference for actual practitioners of democratic education and invited a small group back to Hadera for two days to discuss issues specific to our own schools.

About twenty people took part, a dozen or so from Hadera who dropped in from time to time, two staff and four students from Sands, Lotte Kreissler from the Freie

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Gesamtschule in Vienna and Lois Holzman from the Barbara Taylor School in Harlem, New York. It was reassuring to meet other people with similar ideas to our own. We found our discussions so stimulating that we decided to meet again the next year at Sands School, in the UK.

Israel, Austria and the UK were the only countries represented in 1994, but by 1995, in Vienna, there were participants from nine different countries, and then eighteen different countries were represented at the IDEC (International Democratic Education Conference) in Tokyo in 2000. At all these conferences there has always been a determination to include a large proportion of current students among the participants. The Sands IDEC in 1997 and the Japanese IDEC in 2000 were run almost entirely by teenagers.

Many schools attending IDECs for the first time had beforehand suffered from the same misconception that I had had over Sands and Summerhill. They had thought they were alone: at IDECs they found they were one among many.

It has not only been similarities that people have discovered, but also differences. At several conferences there have been efforts made to define democratic education. At the Tokyo IDEC in 2000, Lynette (Gribble) and I were asked to set up a democratic education network, which now exists at www.idenetwork.org. Membership is self-selecting, but members are asked uphold such ideals as:

- respect and trust for children
- equality of status of children and adults
- shared responsibility

- freedom of choice of activity
- democratic governance by children and staff together, without reference to any supposedly superior guide or system.

At the Berlin IDEC in 2005 the participants agreed on the following statement:

‘We believe that, in any educational setting, young people have the right: to decide individually how, when, what, where and with whom they learn, to have an equal share in the decision-making as to how their organizations—in particular their schools—are run, and which rules and sanctions, if any, are necessary.’

All this fairly blew apart my notion of the uniqueness of Summerhill and Sands, but conferences, however successful they may be, do not guarantee the success of any of the schools taking part. Luckily for me, soon after that first meeting in Hadera, I heard that John Shotton, the author of *No Master High or Low*, who had been planning a book about free schools around the world, was going to have to abandon the project for lack of time and was happy to leave his contacts to me, a recently retired teacher with time to spare. I had a growing list of schools in my own head, but John’s list added others I had not heard of—Tamariki, in New Zealand, and Sumavanam and Mirambika in India were new to me. I determined to visit as many of these schools as possible.

This is a full list of the democratic schools where I have spent four days or more:

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- The Barbara Taylor School (USA)
- Bramblewood (not its real name – they told me that whenever anything was published about them under their real name they were overwhelmed with applications to join from unwelcome hippies) (USA)
- The Butterflies Organisation for Street and Working Children (India)
- Countesthorpe Community College (England)
- Doctor Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School (USA)
- Kinokuni (Japan)
- Der Märtplatz and the Kleingruppe Lufingen (Switzerland)
- The Democratic School of Hadera (Israel)
- Mirambika (India)
- Moo Baan Dek (Thailand)
- The Pesta (Ecuador)
- Sudbury Valley (USA)
- Sumavanam (India)
- Tamariki (New Zealand)
- Tokyo Shure (Japan)

Summerhill does not appear in this list, because I have never spent more than a day or two there, and nor do some other schools that I have visited for shorter periods and admired, such as La Prairie in France, Kapriole in Germany, and the Lernwerkstatt im Wasserschloß in Austria. Room 13, in Caol Primary School, where I spent almost two weeks, I have also omitted because it is only one room in a supposedly ordinary school. And there are of course many other interesting schools I have never visited at all, such as School

734 in Moscow, known as the School for Self-Determination, transformed from the conventional system by Alexandr Tubelsky in 1985, which has over 1000 pupils, and Falko Peschel's Bildungsschule Harzberg, founded in 2009, a primary school where children who have never been to conventional schools come with their eagerness to learn undamaged, and choose for themselves what they will do each day.

When you first visit any of these schools, whatever time you arrive, you have the impression that it is break time. On your second day you begin to see that the students do have individual agendas; conversation, reading, computer games and listening to music might be seen as recreational activities but you begin to see that recreation is not purposeless. By the third day you notice that the students are really taking advantage of the freedom they are given, using the adults around them for help and advice, enjoying themselves literally exploring the world, finding out what interests them, learning what they need to know in a fraction of the time it would take under conventional instruction and talking. Yes, talking on and on about things that really matter to them.

No two schools that I visited were run on identical lines. The first entry in my diary for the last school I visited for my book, *Real Education, Varieties of Freedom*, is "Astonished all over again."

There are differences in setting. Tokyo Shure is in what was formerly a small office block, Bramblewood (USA) is a group of families, mostly living in houses they built themselves in a growing forest, the Pesta (Ecuador) had purpose-built premises on the side of an extinct volcano, overlooking hundreds of miles of plain before another row of volcanoes in the

distance, Sudbury Valley (USA) is in what was once a large family home. The street educators from the Butterflies organisation for street and working children in New Delhi take their trunks full of toys and educational materials out to public places where any child may come to learn or play. There were differences in the age of the students. The youngest at Sands School are eleven years old, the oldest at Tamariki (New Zealand) are thirteen. Summerhill does not like accepting teenagers unless they have already learnt how to handle a free environment. The Puerto Rican High School in Chicago, as its name suggests, only takes students aged sixteen or more.

There were differences in size. The Barbara Taylor School (USA) had only about ten students when I visited. Dartington Hall School, at its height, had over 300, covering an age range of three to eighteen.

There were differences in the background of the students. To take extreme examples, Dartington Hall School although it did take some children for reduced fees and others for nothing, was basically an expensive school for children of the liberal, middle class. Moo Baan Dek, in Thailand, is a village of children who have been orphaned, abandoned or abused.

Beneath these self-evident differences there are also fundamental differences of approach, running, broadly, on three axes – the attitude to learning and lessons, the structure of rules and self-government in general, and the degree of freedom experienced by the students.

Firstly, then, the attitude to learning and lessons. At one end of the scale are the schools based on the Sudbury model, where they believe that any instruction offered by a teacher interferes with the

natural development of the interests of the child. In practice adults cannot avoid influencing the young people around them, but this influence, as far as school learning is concerned, is kept to a minimum. There is no timetable of lessons, and children spend their time just as they please. Summerhill and Sands, by contrast, both offer conventional school timetables, which children can take up as they wish. At Moo Baan Dek, where many children arrive having suffered great psychological damage, Rajani Dhongchai, who, with her husband Pibhop Dhongchai, founded the school, told me, “We always ask or suggest that students attend classes after three years of play and therapeutic activities.”

It is perhaps worth mentioning here again that any visitor to one of these schools, even someone who has visited as many as I have, notices first the children swimming in the river or playing in the sand or climbing trees or sitting around chatting and dismisses these activities as recreation. You get a strong impression that no one is “doing anything.” We have all been so deeply indoctrinated with the idea that the only way to learn is from instruction, that we cannot see the value of play. There is a story of A. S. Neill’s about a teacher finding a group of children damming a stream, and immediately joining in, pointing out many valuable things they might be learning from their play. The children immediately lost interest and wandered off to do something else.

Recreation is a time when you develop your own interests, learn how to relate socially with other people, discover and develop your own talents.

Where there are classes in democratic schools, the students are there because they have decided to come, not because

someone else has forced them to attend. This leads to a very different atmosphere.

The second major axis is the difference in the degree of involvement of the students in general school decision-making. Outsiders are often astonished that a school meeting, where the students outnumber the staff, can handle serious issues, and in fact the power of the school meeting does vary from one school to another. In some schools it extends to the appointment and dismissal of staff and the admission of new pupils—the two powers most wanted by the prospective students at Sands School before the school actually opened. At Sands some decisions are delegated, but the meeting has the power to change any decisions that it does not like. Room 13 has its own bank account, raises money to buy materials and to pay the artist in residence. I know of no actual school where the students have such direct control over the finances. When I visited the Barbara Taylor School the children had recently made their first rule—that anyone wanting to leave the school building must have the permission from all those present. I was warned that I would have to ask permission before leaving, and that while I was there I might be asked to grant permission for others to leave. The staff were not expecting the rule to last for long. There are nevertheless some democratic schools where the voice of tradition is stronger than the voice of any current member. Summerhill once had a notice in its hallway saying “Summerhill: Unchanged for Eighty Years.” At Sudbury Valley they have adopted the extremely formal Robert’s Rules for the running of meetings, and the Justice Committee system for dealing with disciplinary problems seems to be set in stone.

The third major area of difference is in the sheer number of rules and the system of enforcing them. Sudbury Valley, the extreme example of non-interference in a child’s learning, stands at the opposite end of the scale when it comes to rules and discipline. They have their own book of rules an inch thick, and the Justice Committee for dealing with breaches of them. The Justice Committee may have to meet several times a week and sometimes imposes punishments.

Very small schools don’t need rules at all. When Sands School started with about twenty pupils it was agreed that “Common sense will take the place of rules,” as Andrew Edwards, one of the original students, phrased it. Nevertheless, the school did start with two rules—no drugs and no alcohol—and as the school has grown so has the number of rules. For instance everyone is supposed to help clear up at the end of the day, and there are various health and safety requirements. Rules at Sands, as I think at all democratic schools, are made at the school meeting of staff and students (and sometimes parents as well, though teenagers in particular tend not to like parental interference in their world).

The Puerto Rican High School in Chicago was the only school I visited that had a rule about uniform. You were not allowed to wear one, because uniforms were associated with gangs.

However many rules there may be at any of these schools, the students generally feel themselves to be free. Dan Greenberg’s first book about Sudbury Valley is called *Free at Last*. The students at the Puerto Rican High School felt safe once they were inside the school building. (I write about the school in the past tense

because it has moved to a different area. I can only describe it as I saw it in 2001.)

Tokyo has a freedom of its own, that is, as far as I know, unique. If you are enrolled as a student there, you don't even have to go. It was set up as a place for school refusers, and the first step towards rehabilitation is the freedom from any pressure to attend. The school is open all day and has a frequently changing timetable of lessons and activities requested by the students. For most of them this scheme turns out to be irresistible. Shure University has been set up to help ex-students and others with their further studies.

An even more impressive demonstration of the fundamental human desire to learn is the behaviour of the street children who go to the Butterflies street educators in Delhi. They choose to give up earning time when the loss of a few rupees may mean the difference between hunger and starvation.

What unites all these schools is a belief in the drive to learn, and a trust in

children's wish to make sense of their own lives. There is an atmosphere of mutual friendliness and respect which is evident as soon as you enter such a school. The students are relaxed, self-confident and concerned for each other's welfare.

When I retired from Sands I had no idea that these many varieties of democratic education existed all around the world. Now an International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) takes place in a different country every year; at the conference in Puerto Rico in 2012 there were approximately 800 participants from over thirty different countries. The European Democratic Education Community, formed in 2008, holds conferences in the years when the IDEC is too far away for most European democratic educators, who are not usually particularly well paid, to afford to travel there. Many of the schools attending these conferences are recent foundations, but others are older than IDEC itself. My ignorance twenty-five years ago would nowadays have no excuse.

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Organisations

<http://www.idenetwork.org>

<http://www.educationrevolution.org>

<http://www.eudec.org>

Schools

<http://www.Bildungsschule-Harzberg.de/>

<http://www.butterflieschildrights.org>

<http://www.ffc.or.th/mbd> (Moo Baan Dek)

<http://www.room13scotland.com>

<http://sands-school.co.uk>

<http://www.sudval.org> (Sudbury Valley)

<http://www.summerhillsschool.co.uk>

<http://www.tamarikichch.schoolzone.net.nz>

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