

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Autonomous and Informal Education Under Threat: Summerhill, UK, Sudbury Schools in The Netherlands and Home Education

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Common to the three examples of alternative education mentioned in the title above is the refusal of education authorities to recognise autonomous, informal learning. Summerhill in Suffolk, UK, was threatened with closure but survived, not so much based on the acceptance of the school philosophy as the shortcomings of a school inspection. Autonomous home education would have been prohibited in England and Wales by legislation but for an impending UK election which meant that the parliamentary process ran out of time. At the time of writing, De Kampanje school in the Netherlands, based on the Sudbury Valley model, has been declared “not to be a school” in a recent court judgement. Parents who continue to send their children to the school now face criminal prosecution

Summerhill School was founded by A.S. Neill in 1921. The school enabled Neill to put into practice his very simple philosophy based on students having almost complete responsibility for their behaviour and education. While there are

lessons similar to those in mainstream schools, students choose whether or not to attend. This philosophy has remained more or less intact for 92 years.

Numerous government inspections throughout this time were, without exception, positive; often making the point that mainstream schools could learn a lot from Summerhill. Until 1999 that is... when an OFSTED inspection described voluntary attendance at lessons as “the negative freedom not to be taught.” The inspectors stipulated that attendance at lessons must be made compulsory or the school would fail the inspection. In other words the school would have to abandon its philosophy (which it never would entertain), or close down.

Zoe Redhead, daughter of A.S. Neill and proprietor of the school, appealed to the Independent Schools Tribunal and the case was heard at the Royal Courts of Justice. The school was represented by the human rights lawyer, Geoffrey Robinson QC. The case lasted just two days before the Department of Education caved in following a savaging of the OFSTED

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inspection during cross examination. The Department of Education attempted to save face by stating that they had given permission to the school to continue in its present form while tightening up some of its existing procedures. I think this was the first time that any school had stood up to and openly challenged and held to account the dreaded OFSTED inspectors. No doubt the government did not want its high-handed inspection procedures to be derided any further. While the school accepted the favourable compromise, some of the teachers were dissatisfied. They wanted to continue the hearing with the intention of winning the case outright, fully vindicating the school's philosophy.

There were three kinds of evidence which hardly featured in the curtailed court hearing. The first and by far the most important was the written endorsement of the school by hundreds of parents from all over the world. The second was the alternative inspection conducted by educational experts, academics and professionals. The third, my statement as an expert witness of the court, was based on my research into autonomous and informal learning with home educated children, the point being to show how much children will progress educationally when not in lessons. I demonstrated that if pupils do not go to lessons, as many choose not to, especially during the early secondary years, they would still learn a tremendous amount informally.

In the latest OFSTED inspection in 2011 the inspectors did at least pay lip service to informal learning outside lessons, stating: "A fundamental aspect of the school's curriculum is that learning takes place out of lessons as well as in them... [activities] include making films,

organising and performing in musical or dramatic events, and learning different languages." While this may be so, these hardly touch on the richness and diversity of informal learning opportunities the students enjoy. In fact, discussions with Summerhill students yielded 116 activities which provided informal learning opportunities. The most obvious one the inspectors missed arises spontaneously in informal social conversation. Summerhill students are especially privileged in this respect because they converse with older and younger children as well as with peers and adult staff members. As this ex-pupil wrote in evidence: "I seldom went to lessons but gained a lot of knowledge en passant, by talking to older pupils, staff and visitors and reading books" (ex-pupil questionnaire).

My research with home education families whose approach is informal and autonomous demonstrates clearly that children will learn anyway, without any imposed structure.

The Sudbury Valley School, founded in the US in the 1960s extended the Summerhill model, giving students complete responsibility for their education, so that there is no curriculum other than that devised by the children themselves. Sudbury schools are now to be found throughout the world though not in the UK. And, just as was the case with Summerhill, some national governments do not approve because they share the tunnel vision of the UK OFSTED when it comes to education, viewing it only through the mainstream prism of set curricula, teaching, written exercises, monitoring and testing.

At present this is exactly what is happening in the Netherlands where De

Kampanje school in Amersfoort (one of three Sudbury schools in The Netherlands) is going through the Courts. Having lost a civil court case, the school should have closed down but refused, so parents with children at the school are now facing criminal charges. Meanwhile, the school is also appealing to the European Court of Human Rights.

I provided an expert witness report on De Kampanje, based on a visit to the school and my research into autonomous and informal learning. I pointed out that most of the cherished beliefs and well established practices governing education in mainstream school are there by custom and tradition and no more. They may be necessary for the effective running of mainstream schools but they are not educational "givens" in any scientific sense. For example, there is no scientific rationale for the assumption that all children should be able to read by the age of seven, that a broad curriculum is necessarily better than specialising in what might capture a child's interest, that teaching and learning necessarily need to follow the set steps determined by the structure of the curriculum, that the school

day has to be a certain length or split into separate lessons, that each area of the curriculum, or each subject, requires a specified amount of time to be devoted to it, that examinations need to be taken at a certain age or at the same time, that academic progress should regularly be assessed by written work and tests. These are really only traditions and customs which have developed over time, often for practical reasons. They may be necessary to provide an effective education in mainstream schools. They may be what the vast majority of children experience, but it does not follow that they have universal application as the education authorities assume.

In contrast, autonomous and informal education can be justified on philosophical and scientific grounds as my research with Harriet Pattison clearly demonstrates (see references). Alternative and innovative approaches to education contribute greatly to our understanding of the fundamental nature of learning and should be encouraged. Proscribing these, as Geoffrey Robinson remarked in his opening speech at the Summerhill court hearing, would be "an act of educational vandalism."

References

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