

## **Summerhill: A Call for Significance in a World of Irrelevance**

**By Jocelyn Weeda**

Imagine sitting in an English countryside cottage looking through a window that overlooks a school – not your typical school with a building full of classrooms, bells ringing with mostly dutiful students shuffling from one class to the next, students sitting in classrooms with teachers leading the lessons – but instead more camp-like in its structure with several buildings throughout the grounds including a tool shed, bunk houses with student beds, a main house, and several other buildings that will allow the students to decide the experiences that will be part of their schooling. As you watch the children at this atypical school, you notice the absence of a schedule, students are engaged in several activities – some working together, others working on their own, some just playing and the adults are a part of the picture but not lecturing, disciplining, and calling all the shots. Students are curious, imaginative, engaged, and most of all happy. If the year is 1960, you may very well be looking at Summerhill, a school that was designed to not only educate, but based on the philosophical ideals of freedom and happiness, a school that is founded on the principle that student voice should be honored, a school that was radical for its time and let's be honest, radical for even the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Many will read the beginning of this chapter and think of a place that is idealistic, all sunshine, lollipops, and rainbows that cannot really exist, but in actuality Summerhill and other democratic schools really exist in this and similar ways. These schools give students “free-range” over not only the property, but also their education. This idea of a free-range childhood was coined by a former Summerhill houseparent, Matthew Appleton, and has sparked a movement today for parenting modeled after the freedom philosophy that is the hallmark of Summerhill. Many public school teachers, like myself, will think this is an unattainable ideal in

the structure of schooling today. In this chapter, it is my intent to show that Summerhill is a place where each child feels significant – as if they not only belong, but will be missed if not there. This is a critical element needed in today’s classrooms. As we explore this idea of significance, I will present a case of a former struggling student at my school who got lost in and by the educational system today, look at how the idea of Summerhill was formed by humanistic philosophy juxtaposed in a world that was not being operated in that way, examine the controversy that Summerhill created then and now, scrutinize the focus of schools today, and finally explore the window that Summerhill can invite each and every one of us to look through to consider possibilities of implementation in our own world. Summerhill is thought provoking and provides us with an open window through which to view a society in which we honor each child as significant – an educational world different than the ones we typically inhabit today.

### **A Glimpse at One Student Today**

First, let's examine the real case of Jacob, a former student at the school where I previously taught. Jacob was a young and enthusiastic 6<sup>th</sup> grader who was eager to graduate from elementary school to attend middle school so he could learn from a teacher who specialized in science; specifically he wanted to learn more about astronomy. He had taken in all the books, movies, and Discovery Channel shows about astronomy that he could get his hands on and was ready to learn from someone who shared his same interest. He ran into science his first day of middle school ...

Jacob: Hi! I’m Jacob! I love astronomy and can’t wait to learn all about it!

Teacher: Jacob, it’s so nice to meet you and I’m so glad to have a fellow scientist to share the next 3 years! Unfortunately, we don’t have astronomy in our Science standards this

year, but you will learn lots of other exciting aspects of science. Astronomy will be here in no time! Please take your seat.

Jacob's enthusiasm was crushed immediately, but he summoned the resolve to stick with science. Although Jacob had exhibited some anxiety issues in the past and school was not his strong suit, he did have a real interest in astronomy and knew he could hang on to learn more about it. He did not do well in most of his classes that year, but he did apply himself the most in science earned grades of Bs and Cs (record-high grades for Jacob). Jacob did learn the other aspects of science (Ecology, Chemistry, Geology, etc.), but they didn't interest him as much as astronomy.

The next year, Jacob came back to his teacher again ready to learn, he hoped that astronomy would be in his near future...

Jacob: Is this the year that we learn about astronomy?

Teacher: I know you are so excited to learn about astronomy, Jacob. Astronomy is in our 8<sup>th</sup> grade standards. You are half way to 8<sup>th</sup> grade and we have an awesome unit in astronomy at the beginning of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I know you will be shining star (pun intended) at that time!

Jacob's 7<sup>th</sup> grade year was very difficult for him academically and emotionally. His grades dropped in all his classes, including science. He began to withdraw from his classmates and started missing school on a weekly basis. Unfortunately, Jacob never made it to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade where astronomy awaited; he dropped out of middle school before the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade. He had an anxiety disorder and had no real connection compelling him to stay in school. Jacob lost all sense of significance. Would it really matter if he was at school or not? Against his parents' and teachers' desires, it was decided for Jacob's best interest that he be homeschooled for the rest of his secondary schooling years. We have since lost contact with Jacob and have the sincerest hope that he was able to be successful and most of all, happy.

It would be naïve to think that just having taught Jacob astronomy would have rectified all that troubled him, but Jacob and his story still haunt me today. I wonder if part of the disconnect with school resulted from his experience with an inflexible curriculum born from a rigid system that fostered his sense of alienation from both the school and himself. Jacob spent nine years in a system that did not value his voice and left him feeling powerless. What would have come of Jacob if he weren't being educated in the age of standards and accountability where the content is prescribed by grade levels? What would have happened to Jacob if we would have just let him learn and nurtured his interests? What would have happened if we had given him the control over his own learning and allowed him to apply his knowledge? What would have happened to Jacob if he weren't in a system that encouraged following the strict rules of a traditionalist, content-driven curriculum, instead of honoring the needs and voice of the student? What would have happened if Jacob went to school at Summerhill?

## **Summerhill**

*Imagine a school... Where kids have freedom to be themselves; where success is not defined by academic achievement but by the child's own definition of success; where the whole school deals democratically with issues, with each individual having an equal right to be heard; where you can play all day if you want to; and there is time and space to sit and dream...could there be such a school? – A.S. Neill's Summerhill*  
(Summerhill Website, 2004)

Summerhill is a private, progressive school that is still in existence today. It was founded by A.S. Neill in 1921 and is headed today by his daughter, Zoe Neill Readhead. The school's philosophy is based on happiness. At Summerhill, it is believed that happiness comes from personal freedom and student ownership. A.S. Neill (1960) asserts, "... the aim of life is to find happiness, which means to find interest. Education should be a preparation for life. Our culture

has not been very successful. Our education, politics, and economics lead to war. Our medicines have not done away with disease. Our religion has not abolished usury and robbery” (p. 24).

At Summerhill, classes are not compulsory and at the heart of the school’s philosophy is the notion that only acts completed by self-motivation are worth doing. This is the core of freedom, not license to do whatever one pleases without thought. “Freedom means doing what you like, so long as you don’t interfere with the freedom of others. The result is self-discipline” (Neill, p. 44). Another important aspect of Summerhill is that there are weekly meetings to decide on community rules. Students run the meeting, discussing the welfare of all at Summerhill including rules, any infractions, and others' concerns. Every member of the school (both adult and child) has one vote. In these meetings and in the school, children have the right to express themselves without judgment or punishment. The activities and classes that are available are determined by students and include free access to woodworking, art, and drama rooms. Summerhill was designed to invite its students to freely explore their own learning.

### **How the Summerhill Philosophy Developed**

The founder of Summerhill was Alexander Sutherland Neill. A. S. Neill lived in a time when children were mainly viewed as small adults that needed to be molded into productive citizens; however, there were emerging humanist voices that claimed the value of each person, and that children should be viewed as developing individuals. Neill was born in 1873 in Scotland when Victorian social values based on moral and religious doctrine dominated. As Neill was being educated in his own compulsory schooling by his Schoolmaster father, Sigmund Freud opened his own practice in Vienna to delve into the human psyche and personality. Freud established ideas of repression, transference, and psychotherapy that began to permeate the

education world. When Neill graduated from the University of Edinburgh at age 14, John Dewey published an article in the *School Journal* that summarized his views of progressive education with an emphasis on giving students a command of themselves and on building community. Just two years later, Neill was an apprentice schoolmaster himself in which his ideals of freedom, democracy, and hope began to form.

Neill continued his education at Edinburgh University with a major in English Literature, as Freudian psychology was making a big push into education, and he joined an experimental school called King Alfred School as a new teacher, during which time Nietzsche's focus on the powers of humankind and the act of valuing individuals by questioning societal doctrines began to influence Neill's own philosophy of education. Neill had worked with students that were viewed as non-conforming within a typical school setting and decided to use a democratic framework that would allow students to be free of coercive structures and allow for personal freedom. Under these conditions, students' behavior changed drastically as they chose to participate in schooling and the school's community for the better. Neill wanted to put these progressive ideals into practice for all students, so he designed a school built on a philosophy that emphasized the need for freedom and happiness.

After World War I, Neill opened his first school in Dresden, Germany, in 1921. By 1927, Neill (1960) moved his school to Suffolk, England, where it still stands today: "We had one idea, to make the school fit the child" (p. 9). Neill was laying the foundation of Summerhill built upon humanist philosophies that had formed the framework for his thinking about schooling and the needs of children with freedom as its cornerstone. According to Suffange (1994), "Neill was neither a scientist nor a researcher, perhaps a philosopher, but above all a dreamer and idealist. He did not belong to one specific educational or psychological school of

thought...” (p. 2). As the school grew, Neill began publishing articles about his beliefs and opened Summerhill’s doors to observers.

As Hitler marched his way across the continent, Neill encouraged freedom from within, believing that a student’s outward aggression was linked to inner hatred. “All crimes, all hatreds, all wars can be reduced to unhappiness” (p. 343). As Maslow’s hierarchy of needs came to be spoken across the field of psychology, Neill attended to students’ needs for love, belonging, and ultimately happiness by encouraging students to find their own path to truth with minimal societal repression. Students at Summerhill went to classes when they wished, expressed their emotions freely, and held weekly meetings to discuss the rules within the community, even as Neill wrote the book *Summerhill* in the late 1950s.

In the 1960s, Neill's book became popular in some American colleges and was discussed throughout teacher education classrooms, while the freedom school concept began. Some teachers and parents began talking about the need for their children not to be viewed as little adults, but valued for who they were as children. The Civil Rights Movement fueled discussions on the meaning of equality, freedom, and democracy. Just as these ideas were taking root, there were also critics of Neill’s approach; an argument against freedom began to take hold in some groups.

In his *Curriculum Books: The First Hundred Years* (Second Edition, 2002), Schubert discusses the 1960s as a decade of competition between humanism and the sciences being purported by the intellectual traditionalists. According to Schubert, the group he calls “intellectual traditionalists” were rooted in the Greco-Roman classics with a focus on the “basics” of the 3 Rs and history. Within 10 years of the publication of *Summerhill*, a book was published that showcased the binary that Schubert speaks of, *Summerhill For and Against*

(1970). The book's purpose was to debate the pros and cons of Neill's vision on education and childrearing. Controversy brewed from the beginning, pitting two sides against each other. In this polarity of views, the intellectual traditionalists thought Summerhill did not honor the society that students were growing up in – a society that had rules, traditions, and mores. The intellectual traditionalists believed that all children should be molded in both character and mind to that which society holds acceptable. Many of those that honored the tradition and structure of society began to look at Summerhill as a bastion of heathens who had succumbed to the evils of the world. During this time of social unrest, many curricular traditionalists argued that students craved structure, objectives to learning, and could only develop these in compulsory classrooms. “The aim of education is to give young people the intellectual tools which the race over the centuries has found indispensable in the pursuit of truth” (Rafferty, p. 13).

On the other hand, support came from progressive educators who thought a Summerhill-type of community in regular school settings could honor the best in all students to transform themselves and possibly remake society as a whole. These educators, like John Culkin (1970), believed “Schools are for students. Everything else is just a means to an end, to be used or not used depending on whether or not it will serve the growth of students.” (p. 29). Progressive scholars recognized the need to honor students' passion and their need to create a world of their own. They argued that education doesn't occur at the same time or in the same way for any child. Summerhill's followers believed that creativity needed to be nurtured. A. S. Neill (1960) states, “The world is full of jobs that hold no intrinsic interest or pleasure. We seem to be adapting our schools to this dullness in life. By compelling our students' attention to subjects which hold no interest for them, we, in effect, condition them for jobs they will not enjoy” (p. 164). Neill lived, taught, and wrote during a time when the climate was very structured and society ruled, but the

voices of psychologists, humanists, and progressives were in the air influencing his and others' thinking about the best ways to educate children. It was a time similar to today – a precipice of sorts – on the edge of an open window.

## **Window to Today**

*...it is a race between the believers in deadness and the believers in life. No man dare to remain neutral.* (Neill, 1960, p.103)

Looking at education today, the questions are overwhelming and their unfortunate answers are making the Jacobs of the world feel more insignificant. First, are schools today set up to disenfranchise students? Unfortunately, yes, high-stakes testing alienates children from real learning. Second, are schools meant to repress those that do not hold the key to navigate the hegemony of the culture? Unfortunately, yes, high stakes testing capitalizes on cultural capital and language that can only perpetuate a hegemonic structure, that is that a system without equity that rewards some and not others. Third, are the learning objectives purposefully set up to squelch the enthusiasm of the learner, like in the case of Jacob? Again, yes, because the higher the score does not equate to a better educational experience. Experiences cannot be quantitatively measured. Fourth, are we breeding passivity and distrust and are the “No Child Left Behind” and “Race to the Top” initiatives meant to sort rather than educate students and schools? Once again, yes, these enacted policies set students up to be isolated and feel more like a number than a significant human being. Finally, are we as educators honoring society above the student? Yes, we as teachers are inundated by testing and new policies. We are so busy trying to meet all the mandates that we are losing our selves and sense of self-efficacy. In the process, students are lost as well.

As an educator, this is so disheartening. Neither I, nor any of my colleagues, went into teaching in hopes of alienating and isolating students from learning, but I do know that happens to even the best of us. After 17 years of teaching, I can still get bogged down daily with the 282 standards (yes, that is the *actual* number of standards that students are required to know in the three years of middle school) that may be tested and for which I am told to hold students accountable to know in just one of four content areas tested. If it bogs me down, then I know it bogs students down, too. How can anyone hold on to 282 bits of information that they may or may not be tested on? I know it may be harsh, but as I begin to recognize the system that is in place today, I believe that many students are held hostage and alienated by the process of schooling – sometimes without the student themselves or their teacher even realizing it. I have justified such stifling of students by saying that they need to be prepared for testing because it will help them navigate the “real world.” I’ve rationalized by saying that I would never want any child to go into a situation in which they will be judged without preparing them ahead of time. I have watched silently (as I was instructed that I could not speak to any student) as a 10 year-old child cried during state testing because the directions said, “Read the *selection* and answer the questions.” We hadn’t used the word *selection* before and the student wanted to perform well but was unsure of what to do. We can say that is a bad test question or even a fluke, but the reality is there is a lot of pressure that both students and teachers feel to perform well on a one-day test that will evaluate the worthiness of the child, teacher, school, and now, as some propose, even the institutions of higher education that prepare teachers! And these tests are not fool proof, helpful, or adequate. But the stakes are high and tilted in favor of the system. Even with mistakes, the tests are unassailable. “America’s schoolchildren (are) pressed not to discover and cultivate their talents or understand the world they inhabit. Schoolchildren enrolled in today’s

cram schools are pressed to do one thing: produce higher scores on high-stakes standardized exams” (Pinar, 2012, p. xii).

I have come to believe that high-stakes testing is intended to maintain a hegemonic social structure in which only certain students can succeed. This process of standardization inherently excludes and sorts students. “Standardized testing reproduces social and economic inequality... Stripped of subjectivity and social purpose, standardized testing breeds cynicism, and not only among teachers” (Pinar, 2012, p. xii). Students who have the cultural capital, by being fluent in the language of the dominant culture and privy to the background knowledge of this culture, are the most successful on the test. If this weren’t true, we wouldn’t see the same students failing over and over again. What does this atmosphere of standards and high-stakes testing assume? Does it assume that this language and content knowledge are the best and most important knowledge to have? Does the test, by privileging certain knowledge, in effect quell any other knowledge?

The curriculum of today is standardized in the hopes that each child will achieve the highest benchmark possible; the problem with this is that “Curriculum is characterized by educational experience, not test scores” (Pinar, 2012, p. xiii). The standards and the amount of coverage of material for testing by no means equates to the characteristics necessary to bring about educational experiences. Students need to be able to take time to delve deeply into a concept and make real connections with the content to their own lives. In today’s atmosphere these experiences are not prized. This atmosphere is what Pinar (2012) would call school *deform* “in which educational institutions devolve into cram schools focused on preparing students for standardized exams” (p. xiii). The environment of schooling sets our students up to be consumers of information or an audience that needs to be entertained. There are a number of

resources and workshops out there that come as gimmicks to trick students into learning, similar to how advertisers lure consumers to their products. These gimmicks have tried to teacher-proof the curriculum by adding a cute video here and an activity there to engage students. The problem is that often these diversions subvert and undermine the educational process with entertainment; students should have real reasons for learning. Deform schooling today breeds passivity, rather than the active, participatory citizens that our classrooms and wider communities need for the future.

Fourth, through this process, students have become more and more isolated and disconnected from humanity and a sense of community. High-stakes testing and standardization dehumanize our children and make them into merely data sets to be intervened upon to create even more data to measure our educational system. Pinar (2012) criticizes that we are in a world “in which no child is to be left behind in a race to nowhere” (p. xiv). Students are becoming savvy to this and are, as Grace Lee Boggs (2011) notes, “voting with their feet against an educational system that sorts, tracks, tests, and rejects or certifies them like products of a factory because it was created for the age of industrialization. They are crying out for another kind of education...” (p. 49).

Finally, this system is negatively affecting our educators today. One of the greatest weapons of any oppressive system is the ability to take away a sense of self-advocacy. Educators today are feeling hopeless. They are also taken hostage in this movement of standardization. They spend so much time preparing students to navigate the testing world, that they have lost their own sense of agency. It would be a crime not to prepare students, but when we are slaves to the system, we are modeling that the system is the correct one. Because teachers and school districts are reeling to meet each new demand, they have no time to advocate against

this system that oppresses and dehumanizes. We need to discuss the purpose of schooling, to realize that it is important to have conversations about curriculum, and to know that schooling of all our children is a just and paramount endeavor. Without these complicated and messy conversations, we will continue to propagate the structural injustices around us. As Pinar (2012) suggests, “we must act as if we can prevent the new catastrophe” (p. xvi). We must act until we believe that the future holds a different view for the Jacobs of the world.

### **Window to the Future**

We, as educators, must have the courage and determination to redefine, reimagine, and renew our schools and education system. This paradigm shift must include a respect for children, a chance to welcome challenges as opportunities, and ignite our collective voice toward social justice and democracy. *Summerhill* was revolutionary in its time, because it encouraged people to look at children as just that, children, not as little adults merely preparing for the monotony of life. A.S. Neill shared his philosophies as a way to inspire parents and educators to focus on the good each child has to offer and to allow each child the time they need to blossom. The past can inform our practices today. Neill’s belief in the child has inspired me (and hopefully will inspire you) to look closely at my public school classroom and find those pieces that will make the Jacobs of the world feel more significant. I have taken the liberty of pulling five frames from the Summerhill window that shed light on Neill’s practices that are worthwhile to contemplate and implement in classrooms today. I believe these five critical frames (freedom, play, equality, community, and celebration) will help to move myself and my classroom forward. I hope they will help you to begin to ponder your classroom as well.

## Freedom

Freedom was the cornerstone of the success at Summerhill. For Neill, freedom was not license to do whatever one pleases, but freedom required responsibility for one's self and one's actions. "It is this distinction between freedom and license that many...cannot grasp. In a disciplined home, children have *no* rights. In the spoiled home, they have *all* rights. The proper home is one in which children and adults have equal rights. And the same applies to school" (Neill, 1960, p. 107). It is the ideal that in our democratic society, we have both rights and responsibilities. With every right or piece of freedom, we have the responsibility to own up to our part of making sure that everyone else's freedom is being honored as well. With freedom comes sacrifice and compromise, but the goal for each child is self-regulation.

*Summerhill* teaches that where there is freedom, there is an absence of fear. In our classrooms, it is important to remember that "fear should never be a pedagogical tool" (Hechinger, 1970, p. 43). Oftentimes students' lives and experiences are not honored because those in power fear the loss of their own control. Fear can only limit a child. "It is much easier to live with children who fear you than with children who love you – that is, you have a quieter life. When they fear you, children give you a wide berth" (Neill, 1960, p. 130). On the other hand, acceptance does not mean license to do what you please at the expense of those around you. Neill emphasizes over and over that honoring the individual is not about being reckless (letting a student do whatever he or she pleases when it could potentially harm others), but in having the child be the critical decision maker and the teacher as guide of the possible experiences at hand.

Freedom allows a child to know that his or her personal best is always good enough. We support and cheer them on as they make each step of the journey themselves – being there for them, not doing it for them. This seems so simple; we allow small children to grow in this way, but when a child goes to school we stop. Freedom allows a child to be wonderfully themselves. “The function of a child is to live his own life, not the life that his anxious parents think he should, not a life according to the purpose of an educator who thinks he knows best” (Neill, 1960, p. 12). Allowing for freedom is the act of valuing the child. “Free children are not easily influenced, the absence of fear accounts for this phenomenon. Indeed, the absence of fear is the finest thing that can happen to a child” (p. 111). Neill believed that students should be encouraged to question and challenge rather than conform to the hegemonic structures within society.

Freedom is scary. To allow freedom is to take a child and his or her interests seriously. It is to assume that a child has something to contribute to class other than being a receptacle of knowledge. Students will ultimately exercise their freedom. They truly have the control over whether to absorb the classroom information or not, to invest in schooling or not, to bring themselves to the process or not, and to check in or out of the classroom. As adults, we like to think that we have the control and the power in the classroom. It is when we realize that the true power is held by the students, that real learning occurs – not because it’s forced but because they want to learn it. They have the right and need to exercise their freedom. They have the right to discover who they are and how they fit into this world – that cannot be learned without freedom. Summerhill was required by school inspectors to provide interviews of graduating students to prove that students learned despite their ability to choose their classes. The students were asked if they thought non-compulsory classes hurt them. One student, Susan, responded,

If we had compulsory lessons I would never have discovered that I want to be an actress, because I could choose to go to Drama. Going to lessons you enjoy really trains your brain to actually think for yourself and figure things out and have common sense. I don't feel at all disadvantaged, in fact I feel advantaged because I know how to think for myself and work things out for myself (Summerhill Website, Pupil Interviews, 2012).

Shouldn't helping students think for themselves and gain a sense of self be the goals of education? These ends are what freedom and trust inspire!

Therefore, it is a teacher's role is to move a child more toward his or her own freedom. It is our job to provide the scaffolding that allows a child to build herself, not to merely fill her with knowledge. This can only happen through love, respect, and understanding – and in a school that is open, accepting, and not based on fear. “It is the environment that cures them – for the environment of Summerhill gives out trust, security, sympathy, lack of blame, absence of judgment” (Neill, 1960, p. 284). Freedom nourishes a child from within.

So I start to question out loud, “How can I give students the chance to make decisions, express their feelings, and make important choices within the structure of schooling that I have in my classroom? This idea of freedom feels very loose, but I know when I have given the class over to the students, they have always lived up to or even beyond my expectations. I have allowed students to create the classroom rules, to teach lessons that were built on standards, and to follow their own interests when we learn processes such as creating timelines of a topic of their choice. These are the small steps that I have begun to take for freedom to develop in my classroom.

Play

In a free classroom, play is encouraged. Play is the way of childhood. Play is where all our hopes and dreams can come true. At Summerhill, schooling is actually optional, but learning about life is not. When you really think about it, many life lessons in childhood are learned during play. I can't tell you one school lesson I learned in third grade – I am sure I learned many. However, I can tell you the lessons I learned from our 3<sup>rd</sup> grade vs. 4<sup>th</sup> grade kickball games at recess. I learned how to be part of team, how to use my keen observation skills to understand the next best play, how to cheer on my team, how to be okay with losing or being picked last, how to solve disagreements amicably, and how to set fair rules so all who wanted to play could. These are the lessons of play – both good and bad.

Play in part can be fantasy. Have you ever taken a moment to watch a child in the throes of a fantasy world? They are uniquely themselves in the moment, using their intellect and creativity while being joyful, adventurous, and charming. In schools, if we have play, we often confine it to half an hour increments of time on rubbery surfaces that minimize the risk of harm. So, I begin to question and think out loud, “What if students were given more opportunities to play throughout their day? What would play look like in my classroom? Would play have to involve being outside, or could play happen inside? Could I play more with ideas, ways of processing information, and motivate students by knowing that learning and play go hand and hand?” Play instills a sense of wonder about the world, confidence in ones' self, and as Culkin (1970) writes “a sense of non-sense” (p. 32).

Many feel the school day should be all about the business of traditional learning. This means that students should sit passively at desks and do work that their boss has given them without question. What if instead of this typical school scene, most of the student's day looked more like recess? Students would have time to explore and discover using their senses to build

an understanding of the world around them. Through play students can direct their own learning, find ways to express themselves, and develop their creative thinking. Che-eun Park (2010)

comments on her time at Summerhill in the school's Newsletter,

Being at Summerhill with all the freedom gave me a happy childhood. I could choose to do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted and wherever I wanted to do it. I wasn't forced to do anything but I did plenty. Running around, playing games, hanging off the arms of big kids and climbing trees. Eventually I grew out of those activities, started going to lessons and began taking some responsibilities in the community, which I did out of pure interest and joy.

Students should have more opportunity to play in the world around them, but also to play with ideas, concepts, and new skills. This would allow for students to be more willing to take risks in their learning, instead of worrying about a correct answer. Schooling should be experiential, imaginative, and stimulating – in other words, involve play!

### Equality

Equality is not the belief that everything has to be fair or the same. Equality in schools comes in both opportunities and acceptance. Equality is not a one-size-fits-all concept, but an opportunity to take each learner from where he or she is to the furthest point possible. In *Summerhill: For and Against*, Ashley Montagu (1970) claims that, “A good teacher ministers to the unique needs and personality of each student, and enables that student to find and fulfill himself, and he treats each student as an individual in his own right and encourages him to develop his own uniqueness” (p. 55). Equality at Summerhill means that no one voice is more important than any other. This type of equality brings unity. In Neill's mind, all hate stems from

self-hatred. In an environment where all are welcomed, there is no need to bully, stereotype, or repress others.

“At Summerhill we treat children as equals. By and large, we respect the individuality and personality of a child just as we would respect the individuality and personality of an adult, knowing that the child is different from an adult” (Neill, 1960, p. 160). Within a school, this would mean that teachers would not be superiors to students, but a person who works hand-in-hand with a student in the educational process. Teachers would “retain no protective dignity, no sarcasm. They would inspire no fear. They would have to be men and women of infinite patience, able to see far ahead, willing to trust in ultimate results” (Neill, 1960, p. 287). Schooling in a place like this would allow for the best in all students, but it is also critical for students to understand that they do not live in a world that is structured similarly. Unfortunately, within our world, certain types of people are valued more than others. Students need to be aware and critically analyze the reasons behind this type of inequality. We have to look no further than our own history to see this and then look closely at our society today. Understanding the society that you live in and the rules of today are crucial to becoming the problem solvers of tomorrow. Students do need to know and understand the framework of how to work in society, but as a means to being able to be change agents within it. They, too, can then begin to fight for their rights to freedom and equality within our democratic society.

The major outcome from having equality in a classroom is having every member feel significant. Here again, I begin to question and think out loud, “How can I help every child feel that her own personal story is relevant? How can I include the diversity of thoughts and opinions in my classroom without privileging one over the other? How can I show that my belief that

every child's voice, experiences, and presence matters in my classroom?" It is in this type of classroom that ethics and social responsibility can be cultivated. Equality fosters community.

### Community

Summerhill is about community. Community is a place to belong that cares if we are not there. Community is a place and a concept through which we can be challenged and cherished. "We urgently need to bring to our communities the limitless capacity to love, serve, and create for and with each other. We urgently need to bring the neighbor back into our hoods, not only in our inner cities but also in our suburbs, our gated communities, on Main Street and Wall Street, and on Ivy League campuses" (Boggs, 2011, p. 47) ...and, I would contend, in our schools. At Summerhill, community is formed through a self-governing process in which students listen to the opinions of others and then decide for themselves the rules for their community. In this direct democracy, every member of the community (child and adult) has one vote. There is not a top-down power structure in which age determines the amount of say someone has in the community. All are equal. Students are therefore more invested in being community participants because their vote does count. They feel as if they can make a difference and that is the first step in self-advocacy and the power to control their own lives.

As I look to my classroom, I emphasize that we are a community of learners. "A classroom is a place where a community of learners – as opposed to a collection of discrete individuals – engages in discovery and invention, reflection and problem solving" (Kohn, 1999, p. 3). Therefore as I think out loud again, "How can I create the opportunities for each child to

have an equal say in the decision-making process, especially regarding those decisions that directly affect their lives and learning?”

The chief non-family social setting of children... is the school. What better place to begin to give children the experience of democratic rule making, with all the trappings? Where better to learn the art of debate, the need for taking other people's views into account, the benefits of open-mindedness, the balancing forces of personal and community interests, the nature of political power-blocs, the joy of victory and the anguish of defeat, the ability to recoup a loss and plan for further gain? (Greenberg, 1992, p. 112).

But, how to make this occur is not always as easy as it looks. It takes a deliberate effort by both the teacher and class to look at what their community needs. This takes time away from content learning, but not from real learning. When a child feels empowered in a classroom, he begins to take on the burden of standing up for himself and the other members of the community. The diversity and accomplishments of the group can be celebrated.

### Celebration

Celebration is a not a one-time event that occurs at the end of a school year, but is shown each and every day through the belief that each child is loved for who he or she already is. A child has to be believed in, cheered for, and celebrated to see his or her own potential as a crucial member within our society. The greatest present we can give to another human being is to truly see them, their potential, and to honor them as a human being. “Summerhill beckons children to “‘Become who you are’. The role of the teacher must be to nurture this delicate process by removing all obstacles to growth and by providing a context of love, respect, competence, and strength” (Culkin, 1970, p. 31).

The celebration of who these students are is still seen at the present-day Summerhill. The students are encouraged to create plays, webcasts, debates, newspapers, photo essays, and all types of authentic tasks. Students are able to take on their own real world problems to solve and engage in their own worthy investigations. If the students choose to have another student or a class or the school as an audience, this is encouraged and their work is celebrated. Students and their needs are taken seriously. There is something about the authenticity of student-initiated work that has a different energy to it than teacher-led activities at a typical school.

Today I ask myself just what is that invisible energy that makes Summerhill so special? I have never seen a man's soul, never seen an angel, never seen radio or TV waves, and never seen the energy that flows through a small tribe on an island known as Summerhill... could it be love? Respect? Justice? The question is out there... if you think you know the answer... then I'd love to see your photographs! (Russell, 2010)

### So what about Jacob?

So what about the Jacobs of the future? How can one teacher simply meet the needs of all these children, so that one soul isn't lost? I don't know that there is a simplistic answer to this question. But I do know that the lived experience of Summerhill with its message of love should inspire those that work with and for children. I implore you to walk with me down a path that works to help each child feel worthy and significant – that they themselves matter. We need to work toward the ideal of happiness for each child. We need to accept Jacob, for who he is and not for whom he doesn't measure up to be. We need to see and honor the child. We need to give time for self-exploration and play. We need to hear his voice and give him every opportunity to empower himself. We need to help students understand their society for what it is – a place in which they are growing up that must be understood and navigated but also a place where they can be cared for, especially through the important avenue of schooling.

*Summerhill* has both challenged and invited me to deepen my commitment to education for students and to be an advocate for change for them. Using these five frames, I have been able to reclaim my own sense of agency by thinking about my classroom and students right here and right now. Neill's philosophies frame windows of opportunity that can inspire all of us as educators to be agents of change. If we do not agree with a system, but do nothing to change it, in essence we are saying that we agree with the system. Institutional change can only come from within. It is time that teachers think about what they can do in their space, their classrooms, and then move out to form collaborations with others who are ready to cast off the chains of a system that is not working. "The social activists among us struggle to create actions that go beyond protest and negativity and build community because community is the most important thing that has been destroyed ..." (Boggs, 2011, p. 41). It is within these communities that real change can happen. Doing this takes a leap of faith and lots of trust. We must make the Jacobs of the world feel significant because they have a voice and stake in the conversation. We must open our hearts to the hope that the future holds and empower our students to embrace the power that they hold within themselves.

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