

Encyclopedia of the Social and Cultural Foundations of Education

Summerhill

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Summerhill is a school in Great Britain that was founded about a century ago by the liberal and progressive educator Alexander Sutherland Neill, one of the pioneers of the rapidly growing New Education movement in England at the turn of the twentieth century. The school was a demonstration of his belief in the goodness of children and in their ability to regulate themselves. At Summerhill, the teacher's job was to evoke love and to allow the freedom of children; they were to be taught without the use of force by appealing to their interests and spontaneous needs. In addition, laws of morality and religion were not part of the curriculum. This entry looks at the founder's life and how its lessons were expressed in the school he founded.

The Founder's Background

Childhood was not an easy experience for Neill. Because he was timid and clumsy, he was often bullied by his peers. Neill attended the school where his father was headmaster. His father was profoundly disappointed in young Neill's academic performance because the Scottish and English school system, at the time, was based on the *payments by results* principle. Children in Scottish schools were also disciplined by means of the *tawse*, a leather strap. Neill recalls that his father was the hardest on him and often strapped him more severely for noise or mischief.

Neill experienced difficulty in finding direction and choosing a profession. In 1908, at the age of 25, he eventually passed the entrance exams and attended Edinburgh University in pursuit of a Master of Arts degree. His one-year appointment as editor of the *Student* magazine confirmed his desire to become a journalist, a career he followed briefly. When war was declared in 1914, Neill was disqualified from joining the army because of a leg injury and consequently returned home to Kingsmuir, where he secured a job as headmaster of Gretna Public School.

It is there that Neill, in an attempt to discover his philosophy of education, recorded his thoughts on education in the official logbook of the school. These recordings led him to abandon the *tawse*, and he began to formulate his radical ideas on freedom for children. Neill believed that the role of the teachers should be restricted to that of enablers, or

guides whom pupils would consult when necessary; teachers were expected to learn with their pupils.

At a self-government meeting at Little Common Wealth, a home for delinquent boys and girls, Neill met Homer Lane, the man in charge of the community. Lane's lectures initiated and reaffirmed Neill's notion that a new approach for working with children was required and presented him with a practical model for this new approach. Lane strongly argued for teachers to step down from the positions of authority, for children to be allowed the freedom to resolve their own problems while schools encourage and support them, and for the reawakening of the play instinct in children. Neill regarded Lane as a genius and the one person who profoundly influenced his work.

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A New School

In 1921, Neill cofounded and cogoverned The International School in Dresden, an experimental school, under the pedagogical guidance of the German Ministry of Education. In 1924, when he moved to England, his pupils followed him. Neill rented a house on a hill in Lyme Regis, Dorset, and founded the radical progressive coeducational Summerhill School, which had only five students. When the lease expired after three years, he had twenty-seven students and needed a larger place. Neill bought a house in the small town of Leiston, Suffolk, outside of London, but retained the name Summerhill even though the house was situated on a flat strip of land.

At Summerhill, Neill advocated for the freedom of the child, self-government by the pupils, teaching the child without the use of force, voluntary attendance at lessons, appealing to the child's curiosity and spontaneous needs, the abolishment of authority, and the absence of laws of morality or religion. Students were allowed the freedom to be outdoors and to engage in play. Students could also say what they wanted to.

In 1960, Neill published *A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*, which became an international best seller. The success of the book drew many visitors to Summerhill and attracted a significant number of American students, which saved the school from

almost certain closure. In his foreword to Neill's book, the psychoanalystt Eric Fromm describes the ten essential characteristics of the Summerhill approach as including:

Fromm concludes his summary of the school and its principles by maintaining that Neill's approach at Summerhill, in the end, represents “the *true* principle of education without fear.”

A Legacy

Neill later called Summerhill a demonstration school, as opposed to an experimental school. He lived and worked for the rest of his life at Summerhill and remained actively involved in it. During his last months, he was often tired, though mentally alert, and played a less active role in the school. Just after the publication of his autobiography, *Neill? Neill? Orange Peel?* in 1972, Neill's health started to decline, and in September 1973, he died.

His wife, Ena Neill, continued to run Summerhill on the same principles. Ena was later succeeded by her daughter, Zoe. Summerhill still exists today and continues to be a successful school. Although Neill's philosophy of education was regarded by many as radical and controversial, his influence on present-day education is evident in the abolishment of corporal punishment and the absence of religion in education.

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See also

Further Readings

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