

Summerhill

Is the oldest school based on children's rights a cooperative community?

by Michael Newman

Imagine a community that creates its own laws through direct democracy, where each person has an equal right to speak and vote, where problems and issues of justice are discussed and decided democratically by the whole community. In addition, there are elected committees to organise parties, social events, to raise money, carry out investigations, run a café, run workshops and talks at schools and conferences, run a computer room...

This is a partial description of a community that has about 120 members and was founded in 1921 by a Scottish state school teacher and writer, A. S. Neill. It is now the oldest school in the world based on children's rights, Summerhill.

Over 90 children live at the school, aged 6 to 17, coming from France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Israel... They live with 12 adults, teachers and houseparents.

What values does this school have?

This is a problematic question. It is a school onto which different images can be projected. In the press it has been known as the 'do as you like school'. When I discuss it with adults or children they often react aggressively not believing my description of the school, stating in opposition that it must be a violent school that creates educational and moral failures. They repeat these statements irrespective of the evidence quoted.

Students from the school have gone on to be nationally or internationally respected photographers, artists, actors, a mathematician, an architect, dancers, an historian, a journalist...

The anger at the school is a response to its foundation of children's rights. To give space to children to grow up to be themselves and not to be moulded by adults, whether parents, teachers or priests, confronts the traditional values of family, church and state.

The early history of cooperation in the UK focused on communities. Robert Owen believed in changing the values of society through the creation of communities based on cooperation. Yet his views were socially deterministic, the economic and social environment creating the values of the individual.

This is in stark contrast to Summerhill. It has a history, it has a culture, it appears to value democracy, and yet its main value is anarchistic, in the Godwinian sense, that of minimising the influence of imposed authority. The values the children have are those they create. They are active agents in the community, not copying the values of their peers and the community but responding critically and consciously.

As new children and adults arrive at the school they bring with them mainly unquestioned values based on authority. The space given by the community, the respect for the individual and their rights, confronts imposed values, confronts the authority of the adult, confronts the ideas of right and wrong. The tensions caused by individual development within the community create a learning space of questions, of opportunities for social experiment, of testing out ideas of politics and justice, of exploring the need for and the meaning of laws, justice, freedom and cooperation.

Is Summerhill a cooperative school?

As an active member of the UK cooperative movement, being trained in cooperative education methods, and as a project worker for a Development Education Centre working with London schools I am not sure of the answer. Over the past year I have been involved in 8 cooperative education projects with state schools, and youth groups. Students from Summerhill have been involved in two of the projects.

Two of our girls took part in a day of workshops with some 70 children from several primary schools, with cooperative games, parachute games, a trading game, samba drumming and dancing, and an active consultation on rights and responsibilities. They were puzzled by what they saw as an obvious conflict between the values being promoted and the methods to make the intensive day work. It felt like a dose of therapy trying to promote cooperation within a system founded on obedience to authority.

So long as obedience to authority is a foundation of our state schools, cooperation can only be taught as an imposed value through manipulative games and activities that actively promote it. Ultimately it might be hoped that the greater the effect of cooperative teaching and learning methods upon our schools the more liberated the children will become. I think this is a vain hope.

We may improve our societies but we will have moulded children, whose values have come from the cooperative movement and not through conscious thought and through the experiences of exploring tensions and conflicts that arise in a rights based community.

Does it matter how humans learn to live cooperatively?

Schools like Summerhill can help us to explore this question. Indeed such schools help us to explore many questions that otherwise we can only answer hypothetically by projecting our prejudices about the nature of the child and human behaviour onto them.

There are similar schools throughout the world, which are networked via an annual event, the International Democratic Education Conference, taking place at the beginning of December this year in India (www.idec2004.com). I was lucky enough to chair the 1999 IDEC conference hosted by Summerhill School (you can download the official published report, 100 pages, at: [www.s-hill.demon.co.uk /conference/confrep.pdf](http://www.s-hill.demon.co.uk/conference/confrep.pdf)).

My answer to the question is yes—that we must have a framework of children's rights in order that our children *choose* to be cooperators.

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