

Correspondence

The Spring 1968 issue of this *Journal* carried some correspondence between the Editor and Mr. A. S. Neill, founder and director of Summerhill School. In one of his letters, Mr. Neill referred *en passant* to teachers as "the deadest people in the world." This prompted a response from Joan Haines, Associate Professor of Education at McGill, who pointed out:

In Canada and the U.S.A. we are grappling with the problem of changing our attitudes towards learning: trying to be more real, more totally present in the classroom, to accept each child more totally and to perceive and feel as the child perceives and feels — to stand in his shoes.

She hoped Mr. Neill would "find time to continue [this] transatlantic dialogue." He did. His reply is published below.

We are also pleased to publish some letters from other readers in response to Mr. Neill's comments and his paper, "Why Have Exams?"

For those readers who were concerned about last winter's impending inspection of Summerhill, we are happy to have Mr. Neill's report that:

The inspection went well even if it were the wrong one, for they looked for efficiency in lessons while we look for it in living as you know. I told them that if the criterion were lessons and premises I had no wish to be "recognised as efficient." But I suppose a govt dept must follow its red tape rules.

Readers may also be interested to know that Summerhill, long a symbol of freedom in education but never a commercial success, recently launched an appeal for funds. We wish the appeal well and hope that Summerhill will never be forced to close its doors.



Summerhill School, Leiston
28 February 1968

Dear Joan Haines,

*Of course there are teachers who in Homer Lane's phrase are "on the side of the child." I get many letters from some of them . . . "I want to let children grow at their own pace; I want to keep from moulding their character in any way, but what can I do in my State school where only lessons matter? I am merely a mechanic at a travelling belt fitting an O level nut to an O level bolt on its way to join all the other cheap manufactured goods we call society." And it isn't only being opposed by — say — a headmaster; parents do not want their children to be free. Over 50 years ago when I was headmaster of a village school in Scotland I had irate parents coming to me. "I send my laddie to the schule to learn, no to play." It is really the attitude of any Ministry of Education. "We are the Establishment and our education scheme must aim at preserving our authority and perpetuating our existence. If children were to be reared in freedom they would topple our patriarchal Establishment to the ground." Let us face the fact that the vast majority wants to be a flock of sheep to be led by a Hitler, an LBJ, a Churchill, a Billy Graham. Isn't the teacher in front of his silent class a combination of all the types of shepherds from Billy Graham to Hitler? Our schooling system is a flock one . . . maybe that is why so many bored children go wool-gathering. Vance Packard's *The Status Seekers* shows that American society is one large sheep fold; uniformity everywhere, same clothes, same cars, same outlook, no black sheep tolerated. It is so everywhere. Think alike, have a school uniform to emphasise conformity. It is dangerous to challenge; society will kill you if necessary . . . Homer Lane, Reich today: Christ, Socrates yesterday. Safest to stay in the flock.*

So, Joan, what can a challenger do in a rigid society? Summerhill's good friend, Joan Baez, marches against Vietnam and is sent to prison but her sentence has no effect on the Pentagon or LBJ. I have run my small school for 47 years, allowing children to be happy and balanced, but the big world with its million schools still indoctrinates, disciplines, punishes . . . 80% of the teachers of England want to retain the cane. But there are signs of progress, of sanity; many primary schools now are happy places with happy faces and a buzz of conversation. Alas, this freedom stops when the secondary O levels force kids to sit and learn in silence and boredom. Things

move, but, oh, so slowly. All the individual teacher can do is to drop all silly dignity, all desire for respect; he or she should abolish fear from the classroom, in short, be human among human kids. One snag is that because the rest of the staff may be fear-inspirers the classes of the free teacher will be bedlam. I know; I had to resign from such a school, or rather I was sacked. Everyone seeks freedom and everyone is afraid of freedom. One optimistic feature is my mail bag from USA and Canada. I have scores of letters from school children . . . "Can I come to Summerhill, I hate my school; the teachers kill every lesson by being dull and sticking to the book. Originality is frowned on." Fine, but so much of the rebellion among the hippies is infantile; they challenge all that doesn't matter . . . hair style, flowery clothes . . . but they never challenge our education system, our religious teaching in a world that is not Christian (vide napalm, H bombs, race hatred, child beating in R. C. and Protestant schools. Suffer the little children . . . they suffer all right).

Joan, in this wicked world, you and I can only carry on doing our little bit to give as many children happiness and love as we can.

*Yours,
A. S. N.*

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April 17, 1968

I thoroughly enjoyed your correspondence with A. S. Neill and his article on "Why Have Exams?" In accordance with your request I should like to take this opportunity to respond.

One of the greatest compliments I have been paid during my years of teaching was completely unwarranted. However, my feeling of elation will suggest to you the esteem in which I hold A. S. Neill. One of my students asked at the end of semester (in all innocence I am sure), "Do you pattern your classes after Summerhill or was the idea for Summerhill taken from you?" After setting her straight I felt compelled to add — "In many ways I don't even agree with Mr. Neill."

This is no paradox. I can say with utmost sincerity that I feel Neill has made one of the greatest philosophical contributions to education. On the other hand, I am concerned that his theories appear to evaporate at the door of the classroom.

In his article, "Why Have Exams?" Neill considers what to teach if the curriculum were not controlled by G. C. E. exams which could well be compared to Carnegie units in the United States. I have long dreamed of the effects on my classes were I not bound by a feeling of responsibility to my employers to carry out curricular mandates of the state and accrediting institutions.

At the same time I am convinced that the classroom in the public school offers the greatest opportunity for "teaching" children to function in an atmosphere of freedom with an awareness of social responsibility. I find children eager to learn, but suspicious of school; needing adult models, but fearing teachers; anxious to cooperate, but forced to compete. The school could meet these perceived needs of students and teachers could be supportive rather than critical. Fortunately some are.

William Glasser as expounded in his book, *Reality Therapy*, and Carl Rogers' "Student-Centered Teaching" are both moving in this direction with more and more acknowledgement from educators as illustrated by the ASCD Yearbooks.

Neill points out that specific subject matter now included in the schools is of questionable value. Much of the factual material is shortly forgotten and often has no practical application. However, when children are given the freedom to choose what they will learn the similarity with the existing curriculum is little less than amazing.

In a course in Psychological Foundations of Education I have allowed students to select the subject matter in which they are interested and pursue it in any way which pleases them. At the end of one semester, a student remarked, "This sure has been fun, but perhaps we should have stuck to the text book so we would have more knowledge in the field." The next class session I administered a final examination on the text for which I had scores for approximately 500 students. The "free" class not only did as well as those who studied for the test but surpassed them at all levels on an average of 20 raw score points with the result that no one would have received a D or an E and the top scores were far in excess of the best of the standard group.

With this and other examples in my experience, freedom in the classroom, coupled with teaching of self worth, skills of communication, and social responsibility will ultimately result in a choice of subject matter which will, 1. satisfy the curiosity of the student, 2. lead to a better knowledge of self, 3. develop skills which are needed in coping with anticipated problems in daily living, 4. encourage interpersonal relationships, and 5. result in a self-actualizing personality.

This to me will achieve those values which I share with Neill as being the ultimate aim of education — to produce individuals with well-rounded healthy personalities who will be capable of functioning in a democratic society dedicated to a peaceful coexistence with other human beings.

Susan N. Cummings

*Dr. Cummings has her Ph.D. from Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona where she is an instructor in Educational Foundations. — Ed.

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March 25th, 1968

Here is my reaction to the article "Why Have Exams?" by Neill.

Bravo! to A. S. Neill. Oh, may the deaf hear and the blind see! Why do we not understand? For, is not this what it all boils down to? Had I only the courage to teach, in the true sense of the word, without any guilt feelings. But, would I not become jobless if I threw out textbooks, "methods", and desks?

Yours sincerely,
(Miss) Inge L. Debor
Pierrefonds, P.Q.

*Miss Debor writes that she is "a graduate of the one-year education course at Macdonald" and that she has "now been teaching for two years in a very *avant garde* elementary school which has given . . . [her] a significant insight into the real meaning of education." — Ed.