

Correspondence with A. S. Neill

Last Fall, we wrote to Mr. A. S. Neill, founder of the famous Summerhill School and author of a number of works (including *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*) which advocate greater freedom in education. We enclosed a copy of a recent issue of the *McGill Journal of Education*, (Vol. II, no. 1 which happened to be concerned with the theme "The Teacher and the Teaching Process") and invited Mr. Neill to contribute a paper.

His response was as vigorous and as uncompromising as his lifelong efforts at educational reform. It is printed here, along with subsequent correspondence with the editor of the *Journal* and some reactions from a teacher.



4 Nov 67

Dear Margaret Gillett,

Your Journal is far too high brow for me. Not a single entry enticed me to read it, but then I have no interest in teaching and schemes of education and statistics. To me you are editing a magazine that is appealing to pedants and formalists . . . no personal offence; you have to give your readers what they seek, and to me they seek all that doesn't matter. I couldn't see the word child in the one you sent, couldn't see the word psychology. Nor the word freedom. I could not see anything dynamic in the pages. I really don't think that the readers of those articles would want to read anything I had to say. Again no offence; I said all this to my good friend the Editor of the Times Educ. Suppl. the other day. You are both purveying for teachers — the deadest people in the world.

Oh, by the way, do you pay for articles? I ask, not because I am a Scot, but because the Ministry will be unlikely to let me carry on unless I spend a few thousand pounds on my premises, money which I haven't got.

Yours sincerely,

A. S. Neill

Faculty of Education
McGill University
Montreal, P.Q.

December 13th, 1967

Mr. A. S. Neill
Summerhill School
Leiston, Suffolk, England

Dear Mr. Neill:

Had the time been right, Diogenes' search might well have taken him straight to your door; at any rate, he would have been pleased, as I am, to find someone who says what he truly thinks.

But you must give us some credit — we did ask you to contribute because we thought you would liven things up and give us a fresh perspective. We are certain our readers would relish your every word and welcome a plethora of down-to-earth "childs," "freedom's" and "psychologys" amid the esoteric studies and speculations. We still hope that you will agree to write for us.

We regret, however, that since we have a very limited budget, we are unable to pay our contributors and can reward them only with copies of the *Journal* and whatever satisfaction they may derive from having their work published and their ideas presented to a new audience.

If perchance you feel unable to write a special paper for us (or even if you do), I should like to request your permission to publish your recent letter to me and, in the same issue, some reactions from our readers. This surely should stir up interest and may even provoke sympathy for your financial difficulties.

What do you say? Shall we give it a try?

Best wishes for a Happy Christmas and another stimulating New Year.

Sincerely,

Margaret Gillett
Professor of Education and
Editor, *McGill Journal of Education*

23 Dec 67

Dear Margaret Gillett,

It's just that I am 84 and tired and over worked . . . the unanswered mail on my desk is inches high. I'd gladly write something for you but the most I can offer is to send you a few recent articles from the Times Educ. Suppl. which you can use if you want to. I've told the editor that I know he will give permission. I'm mailing them now.

I don't know what our future is. The Ministry measures with a yardstick that isn't mine . . . so many W.C.s, wash basins, so many cubic feet sleeping air. To satisfy them will cost a lot of money, but then the snag is this . . . will S'hill survive me? Will the Establishment allow a school where kids can play all day long? My wife is excellent in her work but has no official qualifications. In my pessimistic moments I wonder what chance pioneering has in a world of race hatred and napalm and sick crime. But it's Xmas and I'll park my pessimism until the next visit of Inspectors!

Yours,

A. S. Neill

January 10, 1968.

Mr. A. S. Neill
Summerhill School
Leiston, Suffolk
England

Dear Mr. Neill:

I do appreciate hearing from you again and thank you heartily for sending the clippings from the *Times Educational Supplement*. May we publish your article "Why Have Exams?" from the *T.E.S.* of May 8, 1959? I should also like to publish your letters to me. Is it safe for me to assume that, if I do not hear from you again by the end of this month, you have no objections?

We expect to go to press around the middle of February. Galleys will be ready about two weeks later.

I shall return your clippings in a few days (as soon as copies have been made) and shall also drop a line to the Editor of the

Times Educational Supplement.

I hope that the next visit of the H.M.I. will not prove as disastrous as you fear and I have every confidence that Summerhill will indeed survive.

Very best wishes.

Sincerely,
Margaret Gillett
Professor of Education and
Editor *McGill Journal of Education*

16 Jan'y 68

Dear Margaret,

But do send me copies of my letters before you print them. I forget what I wrote but if it were about Inspectors and the Ministry I don't want to say anything in public until we get our big inspection this Spring or Summer. Now that I am M.Ed. of Newcastle and soon LLD of Exeter I am a member of the Establishment . . . I should really side with the established Ministry and vote Tory. After all I am protected by Eton and Harrow; as long as the upper classes retain them I am under the Establishment wing.

*Good wishes,
A. S. Neill*

January 21, 1968

Dear Mr. Neill:

These are the letters I should like to print. May I? — along with "Why Have Exams?" from the *T.E.S.*

Bravo for Exeter and Newcastle! Don't you think that their honours to you show that the mountain can come to Mohammed rather than that you have joined the Establishment?

Congratulations and best wishes.

Sincerely,
Margaret Gillett, Editor
McGill Journal of Education

23 Jan'y 68

Dear Margaret,

Okay, nothing dangerous in my letters to you, so print em, bless you . . . paganly of course. And don't blame me if most of your subscribers take offence at my attack on their pedantry and call off.

Good luck anyway.

Yours,

Neill



Faculty of Education
McGill University
Montreal, P.Q.

1st February, 1968

Dear A. S. Neill:

It's a pretty sweeping statement ". . . teachers — the deadest people in the world." Yet when I look at us I am forced to agree that you shoot dangerously and excitingly near the mark. At the same time, when your pessimism is parked and the Inspectors are not counting your W.C.s., will you not concede that there are a few who are struggling to break through their cerements and to grope their way toward the dynamic experience of freeing children to learn?

In another context you once wrote: "I have a strong belief that what we need is fewer 'teachers,' for no one can 'teach' anything of deep importance, how to lessen the hate in humanity for instance. One can by living with children, but not by 'teaching children'. To some of us this speaks so deeply and with such immediacy that it is like hearing a well-loved folk song: it is hard to believe one did not write it oneself!

Will you not grant that there may be a few, still calling themselves teachers, who have not yet joined the majority or who may still have a chance of survival if they can break through the clods

and sods around them in time to live with children before the hatred and the napalm win out?

If you will, what will you call us? Obviously, not teachers. Educators? Educationists? Each label seems farther from your concept.

Perhaps the semantic problem is of less importance and the prime question I should ask you is: What should we be like? How should we 'be' in order to live with children?

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, as he is present in the classroom and to perceive and feel as the child perceives and feels — to stand in his shoes.

To some of us the struggle to acquire these attitudes has come to have deep meaning and is giving our lives a new dimension. Through it we have caught a glimpse of children who are free to be and to become and we feel a desire to share in that being and becoming.

Can you find time to continue your transatlantic dialogue with us and to share with us your answers to some of these questions and our attempts to answer them? We shall be watching the mail!*

Yours sincerely,

Joan Haines

Associate Professor of Education
and Former Kindergarten Teacher

*Mr. Neill's reply to this letter will be published in the next issue of the *McGill Journal*. Comments from other readers are welcomed. — Ed.