

Democratic practice and curriculum objectives: Paul Hirst's visit to Summerhill

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the battle between Summerhill School and the Department for Education and Employment following the damning Ofsted inspection in 1999 that demanded changes to the school's practice. The focus of the discussion is Paul Hirst's involvement in the subsequent inspection of Summerhill following the school's victory against Ofsted in their 2000 appeal at the Independent Schools Tribunal. Drawing on contemporary commentaries on the Ofsted inspection and the court case, alongside Hirst's work on curriculum and early criticisms of this work, I explore what is meant by 'a broad and balanced curriculum'—a phrase that lay at the heart of Ofsted's case against Summerhill. The discussion will question some of the commonly posited oppositions between 'progressive' and 'liberal' education, and will suggest that such a framing of the issues is an unhelpful way to understand the radical challenge posed by democratic schools such as Summerhill. In focusing on the daily life and ethos of Summerhill as part of an attempt to build and nurture a democratic community, I explore the possibility that Summerhill's broad conception of learning and curriculum, reflected in the school's organization and ethos, lends itself to a less narrow and more socially oriented conception of curriculum that is in line with Hirst's later work on social practices.

KEYWORDS: Paul Hirst, A. S. Neill, Summerhill, democratic education, curriculum

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship between the academic world of philosophy of education and the practice of radical democratic schools; an exploration triggered by Paul Hirst's involvement in the 2002 Ofsted inspection of Summerhill School in Leiston, Suffolk, following the school's appeal against a highly critical Ofsted report in 1999.

The history of Summerhill will be well known to most readers. Established by A. S. Neill in 1921, the school is run on democratic principles, and a commitment

Received: February 28, 2022. **Revised:** August 31, 2022. **Accepted:** January 7, 2023

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to the freedom of the child is at the heart of its approach. The core features of the school have changed very little since Neill's time as head teacher. Notable amongst these are the non-compulsory status of formal classes, and the twice-weekly school meeting, at which all members of the school community discuss and make decisions about matters affecting daily life at the school.

An Ofsted inspection in March 1999 was critical of certain aspects of the school and issued the school with a formal Notice of Complaint, identifying six specific issues that they demanded that the school address, or face the threat of closure. While the school accepted three of the areas of complaint and took steps to address them, they regarded the other three complaints to be fundamentally at odds with Summerhill's underlying principles.

The school appealed against the inspection at the Independent Schools Tribunal, arguing that making the required changes would force them to compromise on these basic principles. The QC acting on behalf of Summerhill, Geoffrey Robertson, argued that non-coercion of pupils regarding their learning was a fundamental feature of Summerhill. 'If you destroy that, you destroy Summerhill and tear up the legacy of our most renowned educator', he said, noting that closing the school would be an act of 'educational vandalism' (Wells 2000). Two independent inspections of the school were also commissioned and were presented as part of the evidence considered by the tribunal (see Stronach 2005; Cunningham 2000).

In March 2000 the school effectively won their court case when, three days into the hearings, the Department for Education and Employment withdrew its complaint and reached an agreement with the school. Under the terms of the agreement, Summerhill agreed to make some changes to its accommodation facilities and the DfEE agreed that future Ofsted inspections would take account of the school's philosophy. Notably, the agreement was unanimously approved by pupils of the school who took over Court 40 at the Royal Courts of Justice in order to hold a school meeting to debate and vote on the terms of the settlement.

In the course of the appeal, much of the discussion focused on the inspection methods and criteria for educational quality adopted by Ofsted, which, as commentators noted (see Cunningham 2000; Newman et al., 2006; Stronach 2005), also raise wider questions regarding audit culture and the role of central government in defining and imposing specific approaches to curriculum and pedagogy in schools. The notion of 'curriculum'—what it means, how it relates to other aspects of educational theory and practice, and how it can be designed and judged—is central to these questions, and it will form the focus of my discussion here.

OFSTED'S COMPLAINT

Following the settlement reached with the DfEE at the tribunal, Summerhill became the only school in England to have direct input into its inspections through legally appointed independent experts, and from pupils at the school. Ofsted inspections of the school in 2007 and 2011 rated the school as outstanding in a number of areas. However, the DfE pulled out of the agreement in 2014, and since then Summerhill has been inspected by the Independent Schools Association.

While the school has made various adjustments to its policies and procedures in order to comply with the inspection framework—primarily in terms of putting in place policies on safe-guarding, health and safety, and community life at the school—they have not made any adjustments to their core principle of self-government. This principle is the foundation of the day-to-day educational practice and culture of the school, including the significant feature of the children’s freedom to choose whether or not to attend timetabled classes, and their freedom from compulsory or externally imposed forms of assessment (Summerhill 2022a, b).

It is this feature of the school that lay at the heart of the complaint presented in the Ofsted report, and that posed the most significant challenge to the school and subsequently formed the focus of the court case.

In their original 1999 report, under Complaint Four, Ofsted stated:

The school’s practice of voluntary attendance at lessons, together with the fact that pupils choosing not to attend lessons are not then engaged in supervised study, leads to arbitrary narrowing of the curriculum actually studied, inhibiting continuity and pupils’ progress, and lowering expectations of their academic achievement. (in Cunningham 2000: 18)

In order to remedy these perceived problems, Ofsted made the following demand:

The school must ensure that all pupils engage regularly in learning, either within timetabled lessons or within prescribed self-supported study programmes, and that they study a sufficiently broad and balanced curriculum, aiming at standards of attainment in line with national expectations. (in Cunningham 2000: 18)

Clearly, this definition of ‘regular engagement in learning’ reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of Summerhill’s educational approach, in which the very conflation between learning and formal lessons is exactly what is being challenged.

The idea that learning extends beyond the space of formal, timetabled lessons or structured study is prominent in A. S. Neil’s writings, and is also explicitly stated on the Summerhill website, which suggests a related notion of ‘curriculum’ that embraces all aspects of learning occurring within a school. On the Summerhill School page at nurseriesandschools.org it is stated that:

The Summerhill School curriculum embraces everything that happens here: there is not always a clear line between learning inside and outside the classroom. Summerhill strongly feels that much important learning takes place outside the classroom and is of a more casual nature than is allowed by most schools. Thus we would consider the time that a group of teenagers spend sitting together and discussing topics of their choice to be a valuable learning experience. Just being part of the Summerhill democratic community, living with others in this uniquely free environment and helping one another to do so is an invaluable learning experience. (Summerhill School; www.nurseriesandschools.org)

PAUL HIRST AND THE ‘BROAD AND BALANCED CURRICULUM’

Ofsted’s requirement that all students study ‘a sufficiently broad and balanced curriculum’ thus raises significant conceptual questions, in the context of Summerhill, regarding the central notion of ‘curriculum’, and regarding what exactly qualifies as a ‘broad and balanced curriculum’.

The historic agreement reached with the DfEE following the 2000 court case required that two independent observers—one on behalf of the school and one on behalf of the DfEE—attend all future Ofsted inspections. During the first inspection following the tribunal, in 2002, Paul Hirst was one of the appointed DfEE observers.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, while there is very little in the public record about Hirst's visit to the school, the little information that I have been able to glean about his involvement leads back to the central and contested phrase 'a broad and balanced curriculum'. It is reported in a couple of published texts on this episode that during the inspection, Paul Hirst was asked by a pupil at the school what a 'broad and balanced curriculum' was. 'At the inspection', Michael Newman writes, 'When asked by a student what a broad and balanced curriculum was, one of the HMI stated, 'the National Curriculum, but the DfEE observer, Professor Hirst, stated he had never seen such a broad and balanced curriculum as he had at Summerhill' (Newman 2006: 67).

Remembering this incident nearly twenty years later, Zoe Readhead, the current head teacher, who led the legal campaign against the DfEE, recalled 'the event in the school cafe where [Paul Hirst] made that rather famous quote about the broad and balanced curriculum—we were all secretly making fists of triumph under the counter!' (Readhead, personal communication, November 2021).

How are we to read this albeit very limited glimpse of Hirst's experience at the school? Certainly school staff and students could, and did, regard Hirst's comment as further vindication of their approach, on a par with QC Geoffrey Robertson's rigorous rebuttals of the arguments put forward by the DfEE representatives at the tribunal.

But there are (at least) two ways to interpret this 'vindication'. Both rely on a framing of the central issue here as a disagreement over 'the aims of education', with the two main protagonists positioned as 'traditional', or 'liberal' educators on the one side, and 'progressive' or 'child-centred' educators on the other. These different approaches are often presented as diametrically opposed ways of thinking about the aims of education, in which ideas about the curriculum, knowledge, the moral and epistemic status of the child, take centre stage.

On one commonly encountered account (see e.g. Goldstein 1988), the child-centred position rejects the very idea of a curriculum; the prioritization of the child's experience and interests precludes the idea that there should be a body of knowledge that all children are required to learn, and which, in the terms of the classic articulation of the liberal ideal, is intrinsically valuable. Some commentators and theorists writing in this vein have gone so far as to present child-centred education as downgrading knowledge or content in favour of experience. Early sensationalist descriptions of Summerhill, both by journalists and academics, often traded on the rigid oppositions set up by this framing, and arguably Summerhill was, for many years, the victim of a caricature that was encouraged by these kinds of commentary.

Typical in this regard is the kind of rhetoric against the school prevalent in the 1970s from conservative writers such as Max Rafferty, who declared 'I would just as soon enrol a child of mine in a brothel as at Summerhill' (Rafferty 1970: 17),

explaining: ‘A school, therefore, is taking money under false pretences if it offers education without lessons ... It isn’t a school unless it offers organized knowledge in some systematic way’.

In this context, Hirst’s comment could be read straightforwardly as an acknowledgement of the fact that the child-centred approach does not in fact reject the very idea of curriculum conceived broadly as the content of learning; and therefore both as a vindication of its philosophy of learning, and, perhaps, a rejection of the dichotomy constructed by such critics.

There is considerable evidence in Hirst’s early work to support the view that he was critical of the false dichotomy set up by many commentators on the debate between liberal and progressive education. In their influential work, *The Logic of Education* (1970), Hirst and Peters point out that although the liberal view is commonly taken to be centrally concerned with questions of *what* should be taught to children, whereas progressive education is taken to be centrally concerned with questions of *how* to teach children, ‘the opposition between approaches to education represents an artificial polarization, a caricature of the alternatives open to teachers in performing their tasks’ (Hirst and Peters 1970: 1–2).

Perhaps, then, Hirst’s comment about the ‘broad and balanced curriculum’ on offer at Summerhill is not really a radical departure from his early work with R. S. Peters where, as part of a defence of the central role of the mind in any account of education, he defended a demand for compulsory, universal ‘general education’ at secondary school age on the basis that all pupils should ‘be significantly introduced to each of the fundamentally different types of objective experience and knowledge that are open to men [sic]’ (p. 66). His comment could, perhaps, be read simply as a rejection of the rigid view—itsself a caricature of the liberal position—that such objective experience and knowledge can be reduced to the formal components of a school curriculum understood as the sum of subject contents to be taught in discrete lessons.

Indeed, in Hirst’s own conceptual account of curriculum, developed in his essay ‘Philosophy and Curriculum Planning’, he notes:

The term curriculum is, of course, used very variedly, but I shall take it to mean a programme of activities designed so that pupils will attain by learning certain specifiable ends or objectives. I do not wish to imply by this that a curriculum must be a programme or sequence of activities that is not to be changed in any respect by the pupils, that it must be completely determined by teachers. Nor do I wish to imply that curriculum activities are teachers’ activities as distinct from the activities of pupils. I am concerned, of course, with both. (Hirst 1974a: 2)

This interpretation of Hirst’s comment at Summerhill as a warning against conflating the idea of the curriculum with the formal content of lessons is thus not only in keeping with some of his own early work, but is also in line with recent work in curriculum theory, where theorists have developed ideas of the ‘lived curriculum’ (see Aoki 2005), or curriculum as a process (see Pinar 2004), arguing that curricula should be understood not just as ‘study plans organized around disciplines’ (Tedesco et al. 2014: 542) but as ‘the outcome of a process reflecting a political

and societal agreement about the what, why, and how of education for the desired society of the future' (p. 528).

The DfEE, however, in their 1999 report, seemed not only to be assuming a very narrow concept of curriculum, conceived as formal, measurable lesson plans and content, but to be conflating *education* with this formal concept of curriculum. Indeed, this conflation and its worrying consequences for democratic education was the main focus of much of the critical commentary on the Ofsted report and the subsequent court case by contemporary theorists (see [Cunningham 2000](#); [Stronach 2005](#); [Newman 2006](#)). 'Ofsted and the DfEE', Ian Cunningham notes in his independent report of Summerhill, 'seem to consider that the curriculum is merely an agglomeration of subjects tied together in a timetable. We take a broader view of the curriculum and see it more as the process by which learning takes place. The existence of a syllabus and a timetable is not a sufficient way of thinking about a curriculum' ([Cunningham 2000](#): 26).

Ian Stronach, in his careful unpicking of the contradictions and incoherencies in Ofsted's targeting of Summerhill, goes further, noting that while the original 1999 Ofsted report contained the statement: 'their curriculum is fragmented, disjointed and likely adversely to affect their future options', the same report later stated 'their education is fragmented, disjointed and likely to adversely affect their future options'. '“Education” and “curriculum”', Stronach remarks wryly, 'are apparently interchangeable terms, separable only by a split infinitive' ([Stronach 2005](#): 4).

Returning to Hirst's own work, could it be that Hirst's comment about a 'broad and balanced curriculum' represents not just a rejection of the conflation between curriculum and education, or between education and formal learning, and thus an acknowledgement of the narrowness of the DfEE's dominant understanding of curriculum, but that it also represents a retreat from some of his earlier defences of the liberal ideal of education? What, in this context, is the significance of the term 'broad and balanced'?

LIBERAL EDUCATION AND 'BALANCE'

It is tempting here to focus on the centrality of the mind and reason both to Hirst's original defence of liberal education and to contemporary criticisms of this account. While, as John [White \(2009\)](#) and others have noted, Hirst was explicit about the fact that liberal education 'cannot be regarded as providing a total education. It explicitly excludes all objectives other than intellectual ones, thereby ignoring many of the central concerns of, say physical education and the education of character' ([Hirst 1974b](#): 74), nevertheless he regarded liberal education as at the heart of general education, and his account was close to that of older theorists of liberal education 'in the place it accords the development of mind in the rationale for a general education' ([White 2009](#): 137).

This follows, as White explains (p. 127), from the fact that education is fundamentally associated with the good life, and Hirst 'sees a link between the development of mind and the good life, the latter to be understood in terms of the former'.

On this view, the good life is a rational life and thus for the good life, the development of rational mind is central.

Critics of Hirst's account of liberal education often focused precisely on the centrality of rationality, and the privileging of the cognitive or of propositional knowledge within this account (see [Pring 1976](#); [Elvin 1977](#); [Martin 1994](#)). As Schilling summarizes these critical arguments:

Even if Hirst is correct in his assertion that propositional knowledge is logically basic to the understanding of all experience, being educated, so the argument goes, amounts to more than having acquired the cognitive means to understand experience. ... [I]n defining 'liberal education' as the development of the mind, Hirst slights the moral, social and physical aspects of human nature. ([Schilling 1986](#): 7)

It is in the light of these critical perspectives on Hirst's account of liberal education and knowledge that considerations of 'breadth' and 'balance' seem particularly pertinent.

Jane Roland Martin, for example, in discussing Hirst's forms of knowledge thesis as a central and influential account of liberal education, argues that, in spite of Hirst's careful qualifications of this thesis, 'the value and significance attached to the term 'liberal education' means that the forms of knowledge theory has become the received theory not just of intellectual education but of that education deemed valuable' ([Martin 1994](#): 174).

Similarly to White, who notes that 'Our mental life is various: it includes, for instance, emotional experience as well as states connected with knowledge', and questions why the good life is to be understood in terms of mental development as the pursuit of knowledge rather than, for example 'in artistic activity, living for others, a mixed life of all sorts of goods, and so on' ([White 2009](#): 127), Martin points out that conceptions of the mind do not have to exclude feelings: A conception of liberal education as the development of mind could, she argues ([Martin 1994](#): 177), involve feelings, emotions and other non-cognitive states. Yet Hirst's theory of liberal education prioritizes knowledge and, in doing so 'drives a wedge between mind and body'. A liberally educated person, on this conception, Martin argues, 'will be a lopsided person: A thinker but not a doer; an experiencer but not a maker; a feeler but not a moral agent'. By implication, then, Hirst's forms of knowledge theory 'ended up downgrading the emotional and practical' (p. 180).

It seems an intuitive move to interpret these critical comments about the 'lopsided' nature of the ideal of the liberally educated person as implying something about a lack of balance. Perhaps, then, a more 'balanced' ideal of the educated person would be one that includes the emotional and practical capacities and skills alongside the cognitive. A 'broad and balanced curriculum', accordingly, would be an educational environment conducive to developing such breadth and balance in pupils.

Similarly, Laurence [Goldstein \(1988](#): 217) questions 'whether Hirst's conception of knowledge is sufficiently generous; he is concerned principally with propositional knowledge (knowledge that can be expressed in statements) and is

insufficiently concerned with the skills or ‘knowhow’, so strongly emphasised by Dewey that a well-rounded education ought to instil’.

Certainly, there is a way one could interpret Hirst’s reported remark at Summerhill that lends credence to the interpretation that this amounted to a recognition of the need for such ‘balance’ in any ideal of the educated person. On this understanding of ‘breadth’ and ‘balance’, it is clearly true that non-cognitive and particularly emotional and aesthetic experiences have a central place in the educational environment of Summerhill. ‘We have art and handwork teachers but cannot afford a dance or a music teacher, to me of much more importance than a maths or history teacher’, Neill commented in the early days of the school (Neill 1973: 158).

Hobson, in his portrait of Neill, notes:

One area of this curriculum that was given more weight however was the aesthetic domain (arts, crafts, dancing, drama, etc.) which Neill saw as promoting creativity, imagination and emotional wellbeing. In particular these subjects have a therapeutic function for children with psychological problems and also give the less academically talented children the chance to excel at something. (Hobson 2001: 2)

To endorse this approach would seem to be not only a departure from Hirst’s original ‘forms of knowledge’ thesis and its emphasis on the cognitive, but would constitute further support for those critics of the dominant form of state schooling in England, reflected and imposed in the National Curriculum, which, as Terry Wrigley has argued, ‘revolves round the emphasis on propositional knowledge’. The privileging of propositional knowledge over more experiential modes of learning, he goes on, ‘entails the divorce of cognitive from ethical/political and aesthetic aspects of knowledge’ (Wrigley 2018: 10).

SIDING WITH THE PROGRESSIVES?

On the face of it, then, Hirst’s apparent endorsement of the educational philosophy embodied by Summerhill would seem like a radical departure from some of his earlier views. In his 1971 essay ‘What Is Teaching?’, for example, Hirst expresses a clearly unsympathetic position on the emphasis on self-directed and discovery-based learning on the part of pupils that is so clearly associated with the child-centred movement: ‘A lot of new educational methods are now widely canvassed in which the significance of teaching is far from clear. Repeatedly one finds an almost exclusive emphasis on certain activities of the pupils, say those of enquiry, discovery and play, not on the activities of the teacher’ (Hirst 1971: 5).

This ‘emphasis on activities of the pupils’ is certainly apparent both in Neill’s writing and in Summerhill’s current stated policy, which explicitly rails against the attempt to harness children’s play to pedagogical objectives on the part of teachers:

At Summerhill, play belongs to the child. We do not dress up learning situations so that the play will be ‘productive’, we do not look on and evaluate what they might learn from this or that game. Our children just play—and they can do it pretty well all day if they want to. (Summerhill 2022c)

In light of this familiar history of educational theory and debates, one can understand how Summerhill staff and students interpreted and recalled Hirst's comment during his visit to Summerhill as a vindication of Neill's educational philosophy and legacy. This vindication of course carried particular weight, coming as it did from a highly respected academic and philosopher of education who was generally regarded as a representative of the establishment and someone on 'the other side' of the debate between liberals and progressives. The school's willingness to frame Hirst's comments in this way must also be seen in light of the struggle they were involved in following the damning 1999 Ofsted report—a time which head teacher Zoe Readhead, who led the campaign, describes as 'a fight for our lives' (Lucas 2017). Testimonies during the 2000 court case had revealed that the DfEE had, without informing Summerhill, put the school on a special list of schools 'to be watched' (Stronach 2005: 14), and at the time of Hirst's visit the school was still dealing with the fallout and negative publicity surrounding their legal battle. Hirst's remarks therefore provided valuable ammunition not just in support of Neill's legacy, but against the unfair characterizations of the school by Ofsted inspectors and commentators.

It is too easy, however, to read this vindication of Summerhill on Hirst's part as an abandonment of his earlier commitment to the ideal of liberal education and, particularly, his account of knowledge and the curriculum. First, it is well known that by the time of his visit to Summerhill in 2002, Hirst had developed and presented his 'social practices' thesis, often regarded as a radical shift in his position, defending 'a more Aristotelian approach to our understanding of persons, practice, and the good life' (Hirst 1993: 199). As several theorists have argued (see Misawa 2023, this issue; Yoo 2001), Hirst's later view was not in fact such a radical departure from his earlier commitment to the idea that 'the general aim of education is the development and promotion of good lives' (Hirst 1999: 130). While it is true that he explicitly stated that he now conceived of the content of education as 'primarily initiation into social practices rather than initiation into acquiring knowledge' (Hirst 1993: 195), it is nevertheless significant that he also continued to emphasize 'initiation into the practices of *critical reflection* on the fundamental substantive practices [that worthwhile education] basically involves' (Hirst 1993: 197, italics added). Thus, as Misawa (2023, this issue) notes, Hirst views 'mere immersion' into those social practices as insufficient to ensure worthwhile education.

As far as Summerhill is concerned, therefore, there is much to support the idea that Hirst, visiting the school in 2002, following his 'shift' away from his original forms of knowledge thesis, was more predisposed to seeing the school in a sympathetic light than he would perhaps have been twenty years earlier. If, as Jae-Bong Yoo argues (2001: 620), Hirst now believed that 'theoretical knowledge in the shape of forms of knowledge does not directly lead to children living good lives at all', but that 'social practices which have to do with practical activities of the everyday social life in which people engage are more relevant, and fundamental, to children living good lives', then surely he could have seen Summerhill's daily

practice of creating and sustaining a democratic community as an example of the organization of an educational environment in terms of ‘significant social practices’?

Whether or not this is true—and one can only speculate—it seems to me that the more important question here is not why Hirst made that comment about Summerhill, but why his remarks were so significant at the time. It may well be that his work on social practices offers a way to see this comment as informed by his philosophical insights; yet the same could be said of his early work on curriculum, where he argued:

For curriculum planning to be rational, it must start with clear and specific objectives, and then, and only then, address itself to discovering the plan of means, the content and methods in terms of which these objectives are to be obtained. It is on this view a logical nonsense to pretend that a series of activities form a curriculum, or a part of a curriculum, if they are not designed to obtain specifiable objectives. The use of free activity periods by the inexperienced and unthoughtful forms an obvious case in point here. There is no reason whatever to suppose that free activity will necessarily promote any desired learning, even if it occurs in a suitably well equipped environment. It is, I think, therefore pure deception to regard such activity as part of a curriculum if it is not structured to obtain certain specified objectives. (Hirst 1974a: 3)

One of the most serious claims made by the Ofsted inspectors in their 1999 report was the allegation that teachers and children at Summerhill had ‘been allowed to mistake the pursuit of idleness for the exercise of personal liberty’ (in Cunningham 2000: 18). Hirst’s comment, I suggest, should be read as an acknowledgement of the shallowness and inaccuracy of such a caricature.

At Summerhill, the ‘free activity’ of children does not take place within a vacuum, but is part of learning what it is to live in a democratic community. The school’s statements and many of Neill’s writings on the centrality of democratic values and individual responsibility to the life of the community paint a strong picture of an educational environment that is clearly ‘structured to obtain certain specified objectives’; and, as discussed above, this environment constitutes the curriculum of the school in the broadest sense.

Ofsted’s failure to grasp this point was evident in the fact that its inspectors did not seriously engage with any of the learning and other activities at Summerhill that take place outside timetabled lessons. As Stronach noted in his witness statement at the tribunal:

[O]nly 1 of the 54 lodged HMI Observation Forms addressed out-of-class learning. The school as a learning community was neglected. There is no evidence from the teachers and pupils at the school that the HMI paid any attention in their questions to broad, developmental aims. Indeed pupils reported that the most frequent question was ‘how often do you attend lessons?’ (Stronach 2005: 3)

The underlying narrow conception of curriculum, learning, and indeed education, explain both the approach that Ofsted took to inspection, but also the conclusion that the inspectors drew from their assessment of the ‘evidence’; namely that: ‘The school has drifted into confusing educational freedom with the negative right not to be taught. As a result many pupils have been allowed to mistake the pursuit of idleness for the exercise of personal liberty’ (Cunningham 2000: 18).

What gets left out of this picture is the fact that being a pupil at Summerhill involves not just having complete freedom to choose whether and to what extent to engage in academic, theoretical, practical and creative learning activities, but learning what it is to live in a democratic community. An underlying principle of the school is, as stated on the website:

To allow children to grow naturally, to experience personal freedom, to play and develop at their own pace and to go in their own direction whilst taking responsibility for their own actions and the community around them. We believe in freedom but not license. This means that you are free to do as you like—but you must not interfere with somebody else's freedom. (Summerhill 2022d)

As the policy on self-government elaborates:

Self-government at Summerhill is a well-oiled machine, having been in operation since the school began in 1921. Each child coming into the school joins the machine and begins, from the first day, to learn the process of democracy and decision-making. This ensures that there is no sense of lawlessness or anarchy but a safe, structured environment governed by adults and children alike. (Summerhill 2022b)

In his early writing on curriculum, Hirst argued that:

with no clear statement of objectives set out to guide them, teachers only too easily take the statement of the mere content of the curriculum or syllabus as a statement of the objectives to be pursued. In this way the teacher pares down what is to be achieved to the acquisition of a body of information and the ability to perform a number of stated operations. (Hirst 1969: 144)

This description of teaching in the context of a prescribed curriculum and set of curriculum objectives is clearly at odds with the practice at Summerhill, where not only is 'curriculum' understood to encompass everything that goes on in the school, but the whole community is committed to the underlying principles of democracy and individual freedom—the latter clearly understood as delineated by the reality of collective responsibility and mutual respect embodied in the social structure of the community—and this is what guides all activities of teaching and learning.

'We are all too frequently guilty', Hirst argues, 'of allowing the established content of syllabuses and curricula to set our objectives for us' (p. 144). Arguably, this is what Ofsted was doing by judging the school on the basis of their adherence to the National Curriculum, and disregarding the alternative set of objectives, developed, defended and well understood by teachers and pupils at Summerhill, as indicated by the following comment from the 1999 report: 'The school's values and ethos are a very significant barrier to real improvement (School Profile) ... [a] root cause of these defects [in attainment] is non-attendance at lessons' (Ofsted 2011, quoted in Stronach 2005: 3).

Given Hirst's remarks, in a later essay about the 'confusion between objectives and methods where the progressive curriculum is concerned' (1974a: 4), it is admittedly a bit of a stretch to argue, on the basis of this analysis, that he would have been fully supportive of A. S. Neill's philosophy of education.

Nevertheless, there seems to me to be an important sense in which Hirst understood and recognized as educationally valuable something at the heart of Summerhill that the DfEE was either unable or unwilling to acknowledge. The key passage in the essay in question is this:

It follows from this however that the social organisation of a school and the pattern of its general life both in and out of class need to be seen as the vehicles of learning they truly are, and so important vehicles of teaching within the framework of the school's curriculum in its wider sense. (Hirst 1974a: 7)

Neill declared in 1960, 'We set out to make a school in which we should allow children to be themselves. In order to do this we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction' (Neill 1960: 3). However, the daily practice, ethos and underpinning principles of the school strongly suggest that, even in the absence of explicit direction and moral training, children at Summerhill are clearly guided towards a commitment to the values of democracy. A glance at the school's website provides ample evidence of the way in which democratic principles are embedded in the school's structure through, for example, forms of democratic governance including several student-led roles and committees.

The insights of close observers of the school support this interpretation of what the DfEE misunderstood and what Hirst, perhaps, understood about Summerhill. Interpreting the lack of compulsory lessons as a lack of content, the DfEE fell into the familiar trap of allowing the radical nature of what Summerhill *does not* offer to obscure the educational and political significance of what it *does* offer. Cunningham too notes 'the apparent failure of the inspectors to understand that the freedom to do nothing, if that is what the children choose, is integral to them taking responsibility for their own choices at Summerhill' (2000: 25). As he points out:

Because of its basic principles in supporting a form of democracy and in providing lessons on a non-compulsory basis, the school has been categorised as 'alternative' and as a 'free school'. Unfortunate connotations may be attached to these terms if they imply that the school is anarchic, ill organised and unstructured. Any such assumptions would be wide of the mark. The school has very clear structures and rules—and the breaking of these rules is dealt with. (Cunningham 2000: 10)

Cunningham's 2000 report on the school concludes: 'The school's aims and philosophy regarding how pupils live their lives and learn supports them in developing mature and responsible attitudes to living in a community. At the heart of the school is the democratic approach to the running of the school'—surely an indication of Hirst's 'clear objectives'.

Later Ofsted reports indeed acknowledged these valuable educational objectives at the heart of the school, and the learning that goes on within this environment:

Pupils develop clear views on how to live their lives and there is a tangible atmosphere of tolerance and harmony. For example, pupils from different countries learn and live side-by-side, often helping each other to learn different languages or improve their English. Several pupils told inspectors that the school 'is like a family'. The school provides pupils with an outstanding understanding of institutions and services in England through the democratic approach taken across the school and

in lessons such as citizenship where pupils are encouraged to explore how decisions are made in Parliament. (Ofsted 2011)

In this context, it is also important to note that the process of understanding, negotiating, and implementing democratic values is neither imagined nor experienced by Summerhill staff and pupils to be straightforward or simple. As Stronach and Piper note in their recent research:

The Meeting was a place of conflict just as much as it was of consensus. The Meeting has been portrayed in utopian terms, but it would be more useful perhaps to see it as a working dystopia, as part of the ‘organic moving space’ (principal) of the community. It is maybe not too much of a paradox to say that one way the school worked was by breaking down and mending itself, rendering problematic social relations explicit as a moral, emotional, and rational curriculum for communal and personal living as well as learning. (Stronach and Piper 2008: 23–4).

My point is not that Hirst was a closet progressive, nor that his work on liberal education and knowledge has been wrongly characterized as part of a tradition that opposed child-centred approaches. Rather, my point is that an attention to the daily life of the school and the experience of the children and teachers, rather than to the formal outcomes and measurable achievements of schooling, is a more promising and philosophically rigorous way to think about education and what a good education can be, than that of Ofsted.

PROGRESSIVES, RADICALS, AND FALSE DICHOTOMIES

The above discussion has explored how and why it makes sense to read Hirst’s brief reported comment on his visit to Summerhill in 2002 as a significant recognition of the educational approach developed by A. S. Neill and embodied by the children and teachers at the school through its 100 years of existence. At the same time, while recognizing the significance of Hirst’s implicit critique of audit culture and the National Curriculum, I have noted the need for caution in reading this endorsement as a straightforward ‘victory’ for progressive education over the mainstream liberal model.

One reason for this caution, as discussed above, is Hirst’s own criticism of the false dichotomy set up by the ‘child-centred’ versus ‘liberal’ debate. Connectedly, his own work, over a number of years, exemplified in his shift to talking about social practices, reflects a far more nuanced and complex understanding of questions of knowledge, teaching, learning, and curriculum than the caricature of the liberal versus child-centred debate would have us believe.

Yet there are other reasons to reject the temptation of this ‘vindication’ story. For one thing, Neill himself is not straightforwardly characterized as a ‘child-centred’ or ‘progressive’ educator. Although he is often associated with the progressive education movement, even being described as ‘the leading prophet of Britain’s progressive education movement’ (Peel 2014: 15), positioning Neill as a progressive educator is problematic, and ignores the way Summerhill was, and still is, a radical departure from the progressive pedagogy associated with the Plowden Report and the ‘child-centred’ schools of the 1960s and 1970s. Neill had to leave the flagship progressive school, King Alfred’s, after two years teaching there as his approach was regarded as

too radical, and he fell out with many leading figures in the New Education Fellowship (see [Humes 2015](#)). Skidelsky refers to Summerhill as ‘the extreme libertarian wing of the progressive school movement’ ([Skidelsky 1969: 15](#)), while John Darling argues that Neill should be understood as radical rather than progressive, identifying Summerhill’s total commitment to participatory democracy, self-government and non-coercion as its most radical feature within the landscape of the progressive movement within state schools.

As Darling notes, ‘The abolition of corporal punishment, the humanising of teacher pupil relationships, the catering for individual differences, the use of discovery methods and experiential learning’ are all now features of mainstream schools. Yet ‘the one part of the progressive school programme of the 1920s and 1930s which has not been pursued is the demand for democratic government: and this is still not seen as worthy of serious consideration’ ([Darling 1992: 54](#)).

A related reason for caution, stemming from Neil’s own writing, concerns the interpretation of ‘balance’ in the phrase ‘a broad and balanced curriculum’ as meaning primarily balancing the cognitive and the intellectual—or the ‘life of the mind’—with the artistic, emotional, or aesthetic. To see things this way would be, in an important sense, to misread the significance of emotional learning for Neill—who was, in many ways, more of a psychologist than an educator. (There are, in this context, important questions to be asked about Neill’s own role as the charismatic head teacher of the school, and about the emotional effects of attending boarding school from as young as seven years old. These questions, however, are beyond the scope of this paper.)

Summerhill, as Newman writes ([2006: 57](#)), is ‘based on the concept that emotional learning is necessary to create a foundation that permits academic learning to be transformed into self-managed learning’. Thus not only is academic learning, on this view, not granted any special privilege, but it is seen as educationally secondary to, even parasitic on, healthy personal and social development. This is a far cry from simply calling for greater ‘balance’ between the emotional and the academic. As Neill put it, ‘a university graduate can be an emotional wreck; a skilled mechanic can be a dangerous sadist, and unless our planning for education is to aim at producing balanced individuals rather than educated men, education will continue to be a battle for head and not hearts’ ([Neill 1960: 44](#)).

The desired ‘balance’, however, is not to be achieved by simply adding more in the way of emotional, creative, vocational, or aesthetic learning alongside the traditional academic subjects of the curriculum; rather emotional balance in itself constitutes the only legitimate aim for an educator; and crucially, this is to be achieved by allowing the child total freedom to choose their own path of learning.

CONCLUSION

It is tempting, as the above discussion suggests, to see Hirst’s comments as an endorsement of the position advocated by Neill. Ultimately though, the main problem with this interpretation is that it ignores the fact that Neill was asking very different questions to those posed by mainstream philosophers and theorists of education.

Although sympathetic to the challenge to the overly prescriptive National Curriculum that Summerhill represented, Hirst was still, like most members of the academic community of philosophy of education at the time, aligned with a tradition that saw education as a system, and the role of philosophers as working out the appropriate aims for this system. From this vantage point, philosophy of education is seen as ‘as a vital contributor to the creation of a decent educational system’ (White 2009: 124).

Neill, in many ways, was operating from a very different vantage point. He was not interested in figuring out ‘the aims of education’, much less in implementing them within a state schooling system. He was interested in setting up a democratic community. Although the values embodied in this community may have overlapped, perhaps in surprising ways, with those of defenders of the classic liberal ideal of education, as well as those of many progressive educational theorists, Neill was not answering the question ‘what should the aims of education be in a liberal state?’ He was not even, I would suggest, concerned with the alternative question of what a public school system should look like if we want to create a more democratic society. This latter question is certainly an important and relevant one to bear in mind when considering Summerhill and other experiments in democratic education; and it is one to which philosophers of education have contributed valuable work, as reflected in Patricia White’s insistence that ‘the aim of education is subordinate to political aims. If we want society to be democratic, we should see that as schools’ main point’ (White 2008). But Neill was not really interested in posing, much less answering, the question ‘what should be learned in schools?’ To frame the question this way assumes both that there should be a state schooling system and that some groups of adults should decide what children should learn from it, and Neill seemed, at the very least, sceptical of such assumptions.

The body of philosophical work developed by Paul Hirst and his contemporaries remains an important resource in clarifying the conceptual, ethical, and political issues at the heart of educational policy and practice, including the issues that continue to be raised by ‘alternative’ schools such as Summerhill. But ultimately, Neill was engaged in a very different project, as he himself saw quite clearly:

The number of enterprising and good teachers is legion, and they should be honoured for their original work in their cramping environment—their barrack-style schools. But I say they have nothing to give to me because we are not going quite the same way; on parallel lines perhaps, but we do not meet, because they are in school and I am in a community. (Neill 1953: 140)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Ian Cunningham and Zoe Readhead for their help and generosity while I was researching this paper. I also thank David Bridges, Patricia White, and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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