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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Creating and sustaining democratic spaces in education

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**Abstract**

This article explores the context for the accompanying suite of papers on creating and sustaining democratic spaces in education. Prompted by the centenary of Summerhill, the internationally famous democratic school founded in Suffolk, England, in 1921, by A.S. Neill, this collection of papers explores and broadens out the central questions at the heart of experiments in democratic education. We suggest that, at a time of distrust in and questioning of the central institutions of democratic government, and in the wake of challenges to the mainstream system of state schooling, these questions are more relevant than ever. We argue that detailed attention to the everyday practice of creating democratic spaces in a variety of educational and social contexts can highlight the myriad ways in which educators, students, families and communities can keep democratic values and principles alive, thereby enriching our discussions about the meaning and value of democratic education.

**KEYWORDS**

child-centred education, democracy, Democratic education, radical education, Summerhill

The starting point for this suite of papers was the occasion of the centenary of Summerhill, the democratic school founded in Suffolk, England, in 1921, by A.S. Neill. An independent boarding school for 6–18-year-olds, Summerhill has become (in)famous as a school where the freedom of the child is paramount. Although similar schools exist around the world, some following Neill's experimental approach, Summerhill is often the first example that comes to mind when the idea of a 'democratic school' is mentioned, certainly in the UK.

Democracy, in terms of respect for individual autonomy, freedom of expression and student participation in decisions about everyday life and the running of the school, is central to Summerhill's ethos and practice—as stated on their website: 'The school is democratic—each person having an equal vote in the school meetings and an equal right to be heard.' Yet the fame and continuity, over a hundred years, of this particular model of a democratic school, has often overshadowed other examples of democratic schools. To some extent, we might say that Summerhill has tended to determine the terms of debate about what democratic education is or is not. Such fame could be the result of Neill's radical views of childhood (see, e.g., Neill, 1953, 1998) or because of Summerhill's reputation for including children excluded from other schools, or because of media coverage of the legal challenges to its insistence on children's fundamental right to choose whether or not to attend lessons, and the school supporters' campaign to resist those challenges.

Emily Charkin's piece in this collection throws new light on Summerhill and Neill's ideas through her rich account of the often lesser known progressive school in Scotland, Kilquhanity, and the thinking of its founder J.M. Aitkenhead. Her analysis invites us to weigh Neill's libertarian thinking with the community orientation of Aitkenhead and how this shaped Kilquhanity's practice differently.

The questions and criticisms prompted by the educational experiment of Summerhill remain just as valid today as they were in the early years of the school's existence. These questions, we suggest, are particularly worth revisiting in an age when we are met on all sides by repeated and renewed discourse about growing mistrust and loss of faith in the UK government<sup>1</sup> and the wider 'crisis of democracy', a discourse that has become mainstream<sup>2</sup> (see, e.g., Corfe, 2018; Grayling, 2017; Rich, 2017; Runciman, 2018). Questions about the need for a centralised system of compulsory state schooling have been posed anew in recent years (see Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2021; Hargreaves, 2019) and seem particularly pertinent in the wake of the Covid pandemic, a period during which deep inequalities in educational provision became even more apparent. New proposals to address these entrenched inequalities and the damage caused by successive government reforms to public education are beginning to emerge, including the idea of an Open School in England, along the lines of those established in other parts of the world (see Brighouse & Waters, 2022; <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/jan/01/sir-tim-brighouse-many-hold-gove-responsible-expert-educator-sets-out-whats-gone-wrong-with-britains-schools>). As current modes of schooling, curricula and assessment seem increasingly unfit for purpose, questions about the deep entanglement of education and the sustenance of democracy seem more urgent and compelling.

There is a particular value, we think, in exploring these questions in the pages of this journal. A wealth of literature in philosophy of education and political philosophy, going back to Dewey's seminal work, has articulated different conceptions of democracy and has explored the conceptual connections between democracy and education (see Allen & Reich, 2013; Amsler, 2015; Biesta, 2010; Callan, 1997; Gutmann, 1987). This work has led to significant contributions to discussions of educational policy and curriculum, particularly regarding questions of inclusion and citizenship. However, it is one thing to offer a robust defence of democratic schools and quite another to articulate the—often difficult—process of creating and sustaining democratic educational spaces in different contexts and places and with/in diverse communities, including contexts often constrained in various ways through affiliation to the maintained sector. In proposing this collection, we were keen to tap into the knowledge and experience generated through a wide range of schools and modes of education aspiring to be democratic, both historical and current. We wanted to demonstrate the variety of ways in which these ideas have been taken up in practice, and to raise new questions about ways to conceptualise democratic educational spaces and relations.

Central and critical to any discussion of schooling, democratic or otherwise, is an exploration of child(ren) and childhood. It does matter, for example, that A.S. Neill expressed very strong views in this regard and these ideas influenced the unfolding of the Summerhill experiment. Deeply contested ideas about child/adult and childhood/adulthood are rooted in different philosophical perspectives about human and child nature and in equally strong theories of human development, particularly in the first years of life, and what these mean for adult-child relations and for educational processes.

Although the idea of 'child-centred' education is a familiar one, what this idea means and how it informs pedagogical practice is not straightforward, as reflected in the discussions of the theorists and practitioners writing in this collection. The interview with Fintan McCutcheon explores some of these underlying ideas, highlighting how the child-centred principles of the Educate Together movement inform his thinking about leading a democratic school. Jayalakshmi Jayaraman and Smrithi Rekha Adinarayanan are the most explicit about how beliefs about what they consider to be the intrinsic nature of children inform the thinking and practice of a personalised Gurukula education. Through their depiction of their experience of this practice, in which they value such experience as a legitimate source of knowledge and draw on Indian philosophical traditions (with which many *JoPE* readers may not be familiar), they remind us that questions of child and childhood must be right at the heart of any conversation about systems of education.

The papers in this collection draw on experimental and democratic schools or educational movements in England, Scotland, Ireland and India, and bring conceptual understandings of democracy into dialogue with reflection on practice, focusing our attention onto the question of, as Fintan McCutcheon puts it, 'what does democracy, (or indeed the lack of it), feel like to a person who is experiencing it and, specifically, how should it feel for the stakeholders in this school on an ongoing and lived basis? How can noble democratic aspirations such as Liberty, Equality and Solidarity be experienced in the day-to-day lives of children, their parents and staff?'

Some of the contributors to this collection are, like Fintan McCutcheon, practitioners who have been grappling with, and living with, these questions over a number of years as they strive to enact a variety of forms of democratic education. Gillen Motherway's paper, based on his research with teachers in Irish Educate Together schools, takes up these questions to explore just how their approaches to philosophical enquiry in classrooms express their interpretations of the schools' aspirations to be democratic and to live democratic lives. Others are, perhaps, to use Arendt's metaphor for the work of Walter Benjamin, like 'pearl divers', inviting us to a way of thinking that works with the 'thought fragments' that it can 'wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface...' (Arendt, 1968). These 'fragments' emerge through Emily Charkin's history of other, often forgotten, experiments in setting up democratic schools; Michael Fielding's recovery of the work of Alex Bloom; Tom Woodin and Cath Gristy's exploration of the cooperative schools movement as a site that reveals 'key contradictions in the nature of democratic education', and Jayalakshmi Jayaraman and Smrithi Rekha Adinarayanan's reflections on the Gurukula tradition in India as a form of practical democracy. Their powerful case for broadening the scope of debate about what constitutes democratic education and their questioning of the domination of western philosophical and political perspectives, alongside the impact of colonisation, is hugely important in this collection. They open up bigger questions about knowledge, family, community and lifelong learning, about oral traditions and intergenerational relations, and about what should inform the organisation of education in any society. The inclusion of personalised education in the conversation about democratic education also challenges the assumption that democratic systems of learning are necessarily instigated through the state or through related institutions.

Our hope is that these papers will open up conversations about democratic education, and perhaps challenge some familiar ideas about democratic schools. Such conversations seem particularly important at a time when, as Gristy and Woodin note in their paper, quoting Tooze, 'democratic politics is taking on strange and unfamiliar new forms' (Tooze, 2021). These conversations, we believe, are enriched by a careful attention to what both McCutcheon and Motherway refer to as 'the exquisiteness of context'. These detailed descriptions can also, perhaps, offer an optimistic narrative at a time when democracy itself seems under threat in many parts of the world and anti-democratic practices are rife in educational institutions and beyond. In the UK, for example, the scope for involvement of children, parents, and communities in shaping the curriculum of their local schools has been eroded through greater centralisation of curriculum and assessment policies. Human Rights organisations, teachers and parents, among others, are deeply concerned about the impact of anti-radicalisation policies such as Prevent on the well-being of children and young people, on classroom discussion and on education more broadly<sup>3</sup> (see Coppock & McGovern, 2014; Richardson, 2015; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2016). In many countries, surveillance in schools has increased and digital record-keeping, for example of attendance and performance, and the prevalence of CCTV in schools, means that school students and teachers are

among the most surveilled sections of the population, leading to a loss of trust and privacy (see, e.g., Edmunds, 2021). Meanwhile, the so-called culture wars have given rise to calls for topics such as critical race theory, same-sex marriage or abortion to be banned and increasing numbers of attempts to have books removed from libraries and schools.<sup>4</sup> Rather than defending or imitating an ideal model of a democratic school or a democratic society, this focus on practice highlights the myriad ways in which the everyday actions of educators, students, families and communities can keep democratic values and principles alive. These practices thus offer pockets of resistance and reconsideration, and cracks in which the hope for more fully democratic ways of living can emerge.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the report from IPPR. <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/road-to-renewal>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the report from IDEA on The Global State of Democracy (2021). [https://www.idea.int/gsod/sites/default/files/2021-11/the-global-state-of-democracy-2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.idea.int/gsod/sites/default/files/2021-11/the-global-state-of-democracy-2021_0.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Preventing Education: Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism Policy in Schools, a report from UK Rights Watch.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/22/its-a-culture-war-thats-totally-out-of-control-the-authors-whose-books-are-being-banned-in-us-schools>.

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