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**Democracy in action – a student-led workshop demonstrating the workings of the democratic meetings at Summerhill School**

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**Introduction**

This paper describes the workshops led by Beth Titchiner and Natasha Manning-Warder at the CiCe Conference in Brugge. Both are students at Summerhill School and lead workshops to promote discussion about democracy and children's rights at conferences and in state schools.

Michael Newman, a teacher who supported them in the workshop, wrote the section on questions and answers, which was checked by Beth.

**The School**

Summerhill is an 80-year-old democratic boarding school in the east of England. It is a private, fee-paying school. The main principle at Summerhill is that everybody is equal and everybody can do as they wish - providing that they don't disturb anybody else. This is freedom, not licence. For example, one has the right to play all day long, but one has no right whatsoever to shout at two a.m., as this would be disturbing others. Lessons are optional at Summerhill since one of the founding ideas is that children learn much faster when they are learning due to their own interests and out of their own choice.

*The Meetings*

Summerhill is run by two weekly democratic meetings, in which anyone at the school can take part. In the meetings everyone has an equal voice and an equal vote, whether they be the youngest pupil or the principal.

One of the meetings, the 'general meeting', is where laws are made, changed and abolished. Summerhill has over two hundred laws, more than any other school in the UK. Most of the laws simply act as reminders and guidelines for the main principle for life at Summerhill - 'freedom not licence'. The second meeting, the 'tribunal' is for discussing and dealing with conflicts between persons in the community, and for dealing with people who break the laws made in the general meetings. The tribunal has the power to issue a 'strong warning' or a small fine as it considers appropriate. (There are opportunities to appeal against any fine given that is felt to be unjust or inappropriate.)

The main purposes of the meetings are to protect members of the community and to give them the responsibility to make decisions about their own lives and the running of their school.

*Chairmen's Workshops*

An older pupil or staff person elected by the community chairs the meetings. In order to qualify as a chairperson one must be over twelve years old and one must have attended at least two 'chairmen's workshops'. Chairmen's workshops are workshops run by existing chairmen in order to teach others how to chair a Summerhill meeting.

**The Conference Workshop**

At the CiCe Conference we ran two 'chairmen's workshops', in which we chaired a mock meeting case, as would happen in a chairmen's meeting at Summerhill.

We began the workshop with a short outline of Summerhill and its philosophy, and a description of the meetings and how they work. After a short question and answer session we asked the delegates to imagine that they were now in a Summerhill meeting.

*A Mock Case*

We introduced a mock 'tribunal case' to the meeting - a child had used another's bicycle without permission beforehand. We then asked for two volunteers to play the parts of the owner of the bike and the child who borrowed it. We chaired the meeting. The owner of the bike presented a case to the meeting, the child who borrowed it was given the opportunity to tell their side of the story and other delegates told witness stories or made comments. The participants were very imaginative and seemed to get into it quite well. One 'borrower' created a story that the bike was against a small wall near a sign saying 'please take'. At the other workshop the 'borrower' was a boy off to play football for the school against another school who needed the bike to get there in time, and the 'owner' complained that the bike had been returned with a puncture.

*Proposals*

We then proposed that the person who borrowed the bike be given a 'strong warning' not to take property without permission – which started the participants off making propositions of a selection of solutions to the case, which included:
- a 25p fine for the borrower of the bike;
- the borrower repair any damages to the bike;
- the borrower cannot ride a bicycle for two days.

Each proposal was then voted on, and the one which gained the most votes was passed. The case was then closed.

*Reactions*

It was extremely interesting to see the reactions of the twenty participants towards this uncommon method of running a school and solving problems within it. When we have run workshops of this kind in the past, the participants have given off mixed reactions. What we found interesting was the comparison between the way the conference delegates dealt with the situation and the way children at Summerhill would have dealt with it. The conference delegates seemed to dwell on small issues that usually would have been overlooked by the Summerhill meeting.

*The Issue of Fines*

One major issue raised by the workshop participants was that of what we call 'fines' at Summerhill. The delegates saw the word 'fine' as a very negative thing, more a punishment than a fine. At Summerhill the so-called 'fines' issued by the meetings are considered not so much punishments as resolutions. The meetings are for trying to resolve problems rather than for punishing the troublemaker. A 'fine' is what the majority of the community in the meeting feels would be relevant to resolving an issue.

We gave an example of a case where two community members were finding it very hard to get along without bickering. This was brought to the meeting and the proposal passed by the meeting was that they buy a cake from the town and share it. Another example we gave was of a teacher who had a history of notoriously upholding all the laws. One day he was caught walking on the dining tables. This was brought to the meeting and as it was seen as so rare an occurrence for this teacher to break the law, the meeting agreed that by way of a 'fine' he should get 10 pence reward. It can be seen from these examples that the purpose of a Summerhill 'fine' is more to resolve issues than to punish 'wrongdoers'. This was one concept that the participants in our workshop seemed to find particularly difficult to grasp.

*Controlling the Meeting*

Whilst running the mock meeting case, we asked the participants to raise their hands and wait for the chairman to call it before speaking. This was another thing that proved quite difficult for them. Though they were incredibly imaginative and played their parts very well, they seemed to get a little carried away and it proved to be quite a task to stop them all talking over each other. It was quite interesting that it was many times harder to control a meeting of 20 adults than a meeting of 80 children! One reason for this could be that this alien system, to the adult delegates, was quite hard to take in, perhaps especially as we (their juniors) were the ones telling them to be quiet, whereas they would probably be used to it being the other way around. Another reason for this could have been that at Summerhill meetings the chairperson has the power to give small fines (10p or so) or to throw people out of the meeting in extreme cases of disruption, which for obvious reasons we were unable to do during the workshop.

*Questions and Answers*

After closing the mock meeting case we held another question and answer session. These were some of the questions asked by the delegates and our reactions to them:

1. What happens when a child keeps on breaking the law?

They would be brought up again and again. The fine, or the threat of the fine, might get larger. Other fines, that might seem to be more effective at getting the child to think about their actions might be suggested. A boy who kept on smoking, but in such a way that he was always seen, after being brought up many times, was fined so that he could smoke for a week, but only in the front of the school House. It was felt that, as he was a new child, with very rebellious behaviour, that it was not breaking the law that was important but that he was seen to break it; the image of being a rebel. If he saw that it was not important to the community that he be seen to smoke then he might reflect on why he was doing it.

2. Is it not humiliating to be brought up before the meeting?

The process of being brought up is often seen to be enough of a solution. The perpetrator of the problem listens to the views of the members of the community, especially those who have been affected by their behaviour, and this allows them to reflect on what they have done. This can be very emotional as people can get very angry about what has happened, especially if it is about harassment.

The process is seen to be one that needs honesty. Yet, as everyone has been brought up, the whole community can empathise with the perpetrator. People will speak on both sides,

sympathising with the person who is brought up as well as the victim. During difficult cases there will always be a statement reminding the community, and the person brought up, that the case is about a specific incident and is not about the person being a bad person. There is recognition of the tension between confronting someone with what they have done and its consequences, and judging the person as a whole.

Two boys were brought up for stealing from a local supermarket. One of their friends, a new boy, made an impassioned speech saying that what they had done was understandable, they were not bad, it was simply for fun, a challenge. A girl who had been at the school for some five years responded by asking why he had made such remarks when most of the audience he was speaking to had done similar things, including her. She said the community was not going to demonise the boys, everyone knew why they had done it. They were simply going to discuss what should be done in this case.

3. What kind of children go to the school?

Three types of children;
- those who are victims of normal schooling because they are bullied by children or by the academic regime;
- those children who would be seen to be disruptive because of their antipathy towards authority; and
- those children who agree positively with the philosophy of the school.

The school normally only takes children who are younger than 12, as older children find the contrast of their culture with that of the school's too problematic. The children come from all over the world - Japan, Germany, Korea, Taiwan, America, France, Italy …

4. Is the school suitable for all children?

There are problems if the children are too old, or too socialised, relying on adult authority and adult-created structures.

If they are violent then the community must weigh up the positive effects of the child staying, and what they will learn, against the problems of potential victims. A main responsibility of the community is to help and protect its members. If a child is continuously too disruptive or aggressive, with little sign of showing a change in their behaviour, so that other children feel fearful or victimised then the child will be asked to leave. This happens very rarely, and is traumatic for everyone. The ultimate decision is made by Zoe Readhead, the principal.

Another problem can be not the child but the parents, if they do not support the philosophy of the school, and put pressure on their child to behave in certain ways (e.g. to go to lessons). This results in the child hiding their school life and feelings from their parents and leading a double life. This can put a lot of stress on the child, although the school gives as much support as it can.

5. Does Summerhill have day children?

At the moment there are about ten day children out of a total of eighty. Many of the day children want to live at the school, and their parents either cannot afford it or do not want to let go of their child. One boy desperately wants to live at the school but his father will

not let him simply because he wants him at home in the evenings. We are at odds with some progressive education ideas by believing and practicing that to free a child you must lessen the influence of the parents. Summerhill is a boarding school so that children are not referencing or being answerable to their parents; they are answerable to the community and themselves. The ideal would be for all students to live at the school.

6. Has the school changed?

Technology has changed at the school. TV, videos, playstations and DVDs are a major aspect of its social life. This issue is regularly debated and there are laws controlling when people can watch videos or play computer games, etc. The children also have access to the internet and regularly surf, use e-mail and chat rooms. We have independent learning resources including software, CDs, books etc. The buildings are all being modernised, which means that they are nicer and need greater protection from damage and misuse. The community at the moment is fairly inexperienced. We have a strong group of older children, but about a third of the community has been here for a year or less. This means tribunals can be very long and there are lots of problems arising as the children learn how to live together.

One of the things that surprises most people, or at least confuses them, is that Summerhill does not 'evolve'. It is a community that will always have stealing, harassment, littering … The essence of it is that each individual learns through experiencing control of their lives, justice and community. Every time there are new children at the school there will be the start of a learning story, a story of being brought up, of being defended, of coming to grips with freedom and responsibility.

7. How did the Beth and Natasha get chosen to do the workshop?

They were picked by the External Affairs Officer, Michael Newman, because they had done a similar workshop at an Oxfam conference on global citizenship. He chose them because he was paying for their travelling to the CiCe Conference. The children do get elected onto committees for doing workshops like this, and the committee would decide.

**Profile of Workshop Leaders**

Beth Titchiner is 15 and has been at Summerhill for the past five years, starting as a day student. She wants to be a journalist. (beth@s-hill.demon.co.uk)

Natasha Manning-Warder is 15 has been at the school for four years and wants to be an actress. (natasha@s-hill.demon.co.uk)

Supporting Staff:
Michael Newman has taught at Summerhill for six and a half years (Science, English and Primary). He is Curriculum Adviser and External Affairs Officer.
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