



Core Concepts and Common Misconceptions

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The purpose of this document is to provide a brief overview of some core concepts addressed within our educational programmes and some common misconceptions around them, which we believe are important to consider if you are interested in participating in our professional development programmes.

In alignment with Summerhill School's values and ethos, A.S. Neill Summerhill CIC is placing children's social, emotional and physical wellbeing as a foremost priority. Children need to be offered the freedom to fulfil all their natural needs expressed during childhood. A happy and fulfilled childhood is fundamental to people's health and well-being throughout their lives. Conversely, when these needs are repressed during childhood, individuals seek to satisfy them throughout their adult lives and this often happens through inadequate and possibly unhealthy means and attitudes. As A.S. Neill said "*No one should try to educate emotions; one can only create an environment in which the emotions can be fully expressed. If the emotions are free, the intellect will look after itself.*"

Freedom not licence

In simple terms, *freedom not licence* is about exercising your rights of freedom as long as you do not infringe upon the rights of others. This principle is at the absolute heart of A.S. Neill's educational and childrearing philosophy and one that the A.S. Neill Summerhill CIC is aspiring to promote widely through all its work and activities. Therefore, we would hope that practitioners who access our educational programmes and services would make a sincere effort to implement this value as much as possible within their educational environments.

Freedom not licence, allows children to stay in touch with their natural developmental needs, embrace their individuality and flourish within an inclusive and loving environment. It establishes a healthy balance between personal freedom, relationship to others and responsibility to community. It removes hierarchy between adults and children and consequently, benefits hugely both the personal and the learning relationship between them.

As simple as this principle might seem, there are several misconceptions around it, which can be harmful to the child or the adult. This is due to different notions about boundaries. Should there be boundaries? If so, how far or close should they be placed and how should they be set? Should they be the same in all situations, environments, times, relationships, ages, individuals etc? Summerhill School's 100 years of experience in implementing freedom not licence within a community living and learning environment has shown that the balance between freedom and boundaries can often be delicate. Yet, there are key criteria to guide us through it. They are simple to understand but require commitment, ongoing self-reflection and evaluation. Nonetheless, when achieved, will supply a robust, safe and secure environment for children to develop freely, without anxiety and grow into happy, healthy and confident individuals.

Play

Free and uninterrupted play should be at the very heart of an educational institution aspiring to *educate the whole child* and to facilitate a happy and fulfilled childhood. During free play, children are naturally fulfilling their creativity and cognitive, social and emotional needs. It is also a time when they are most happy and likely to discover interests and build positive relationships towards them. It is, therefore, very important that adults do not direct or control children's play and that free play is explicitly incorporated into such school's or institution's curriculum, policy and practice.

However, a counterfeit of play is often used by adults in a delusive manner and more specifically, to make a learning experience -that children would otherwise not be interested in- more appetising. It is important though to remember that when children are sincerely motivated to learn, they do not need this extra "sprinkling of sugar" and that such practices can prevent them from discovering their true interests and motivations.

Several questions, therefore, arise including: How much free play should be implemented? In what ways adults should or should not organise and get involved in children's play? Does this mean that lessons should be monotonous and dull? Fine-tuning our attitudes towards children's play and its relationship to learning in order to develop an appropriate and consistent approach for each unique educational environment, can be more tricky than it originally seems; yet, it is of utmost importance for children's healthy social, emotional and cognitive development. Once again, this requires a solid comprehension of the qualities and outcomes of play and significant self-reflection upon our own practice.

Expectation

The A.S.Neill Summerhill CIC strongly emphasises the importance of removing all expectations of the child within the scope of *freedom not licence*. Historically, the amount of research and evidence around the imposition of expectations is large and we plan to share plenty of this evidence with you should you join our educational programmes and services. This is not to say that there are not responsibilities related to social and community interaction, but rather to stress that imposed expectations will most certainly delay or may even prevent children from developing their self-awareness, self-confidence and independence. Once more though, it can often be a fine line between motivating, supporting, encouraging on the one hand and -even unconsciously- imposing expectations on the other.

Most educators nowadays would agree that teachers should constantly be aware of their students' interest and pace of learning and should not expect a child to be 'keeping up' with the teacher, or other children in their class or group. Of course, we understand that in many cases, government legislation and guidelines impose expectations on both the educators and the children. Therefore, we deeply appreciate and encourage every effort towards alleviating pressures and expectations from childhood and allowing for more freedom of choice. In this light, we would also advise that you do not promise "excellence" on behalf of the children but rather try to share with the parents and the extended school community your focus on and efforts towards *educating the whole child*.

Learning

Assessment

In accordance with our mentality towards the imposition of expectations, the A.S.Neill Summerhill CIC is discouraging any explicit or implicit form of competitiveness within the learning process. Through our educational programmes we aim to support practitioners to move away from age-related tests, exams or expectations of children, redefine their methods of monitoring individuals' holistic development and re-examine the role of assessment and its relationship to pupils' progression. It is certain that different practitioners, schools or projects will have very different approaches on this and many will have to meet certain government criteria with regards to summative assessment such as submissions of termly or yearly data to their national education department, national exams, reports to parents etc. Nonetheless, there is usually a lot more flexibility with formative assessments and generally, in any circumstances, we aim to help practitioners be creative whilst reflecting upon questions like: "Who is this assessment or evaluation actually benefiting?"; "Is it meaningful for and of sincere interest to my student?"; "Is it a result of a student's request to gauge his/her own progression and understanding of a topic or subject?" "Is it needed for my practice and if so, how can it be implemented in a way that does not impose any form of labelling, stress or competitiveness?"

Freedom of choice

When children choose to learn something without compulsion, pressure or expectation, they demonstrate their best focus capacity. In these circumstances, learning is the natural and predestined outcome of their sincere interest and motivation. Compulsion, pressure and imposed expectations can also lead to a certain form of "learning" and in many cases -but certainly not all- can "bring results upon (adults') request". However, such practices are undoubtedly having negative side effects -of diverse frequency and intensity- related to children's cognitive, social and emotional development including self-confidence, self-awareness and creativity. Therefore, ethical concerns arise regarding the extent to which we should implement such methods, if at all.

Several misconceptions around freedom of choice occur when unwittingly identifying compulsion and imposed pressures with the strengthening of resilience; the absence of compulsion with the absence of guidance; the freedom of choice with the mentality that working towards your goals is always enjoyable or effortless. It is essential that practitioners working with children understand very clearly the differences between these concepts and we aim to help all participating in educational programmes feel very confident with their practice around these matters.

It is important to clarify that we are not expecting all people who work with us to implement non-compulsion fully. Nonetheless, we are confident that if you are joining our educational programmes, you are resonating with us on the fact that children's social and emotional well-being should be our priority and in this light, we would encourage you to work towards implementing freedom of choice as much as your environment allows you.

Relationships

Equality, equity, individuality & responsibility

The value of equality is at the absolute core of the A.S.Neill Summerhill CIC's ethos and in turn practice in every environment and at all times. We also believe that all learning and living environments should be committed to meeting the universal needs of the child and should therefore, do their utmost to remove all segregation and inequalities including those related to gender, age, ethnicity, culture, religion, financial and social background, physical and mental health and different levels of ability. In other words, it is essential that every individual, from the youngest to the oldest child and to the adult, experiences equal rights and feels truly safe, valued, respected and heard. Equality entrains the breaking down of hierarchical structures and mentalities and therefore, establishes more reciprocal, respectful and trusting relationships amongst all.

It is important, though, to acknowledge that ensuring everyone experiences equal rights has several intricacies. For example:

- In many circumstances, it might require the provision of different levels of support for each individual (*equity*).

- It might also mean that with regards to rules, decisions and practices there needs to be flexibility in order to positively accept and support *individuality* and facilitate personal fulfilment. Yet, in these circumstances it is essential that the criteria upon which such decisions are made are: a) same for all; b) not infringing upon other people's rights (*freedom not licence*) and c) are not contradicting or destabilising the school's/projects' ethos.
- Furthermore, experiencing equal rights does not mean that everybody should have the same roles and *responsibilities* within the community. This is a common misconception that can significantly degrade the experience children are having. For example, many times this has led to adults' digression and we would strongly argue that adults should maintain professionalism and that fulfilling their safeguarding, child protection, health and safety and pastoral care responsibilities should be their foremost priority. Moreover, as A.S.Neill said "we should not be making young adults of children". Although it is beneficial and important for children to be actively and democratically involved with the running of the school/project community, it is also important that these practices are used for matters that actually affect their day to day life and interactions. In essence, they should reflect their needs and interests and not obstruct the fulfilment of their childhood.

In reflection to the above, we aim to be working thoroughly with all joining our educational programmes to ensure they feel comfortable with the ways equality is implemented within their school/project.

Sincerity

We believe that sincere environments, relationships and boundaries are essential for the healthy development of the child. Sincerity allows children to make free unbiased choices, better understand themselves and their environment and develop self-regulation, confidence and independence.

Sometimes teacher-centred and student-centred approaches are being translated in a form of practice that results in children constructing misguided impressions of and emotional connections to themselves (e.g their abilities, interests, ideas, talents, self-awareness, self-regulation etc) as well as to others.

Our educational programmes are following a relationship-centred approach that is founded upon *freedom not licence* and through which sincerity and unconditional acceptance become the backbones of individuals' relationship to themselves, to others and to their environment.

Democracy

Summerhill School is the oldest, currently running, childrens' democracy in the world. Democratic processes are used to ensure that everyone's voice is heard and everyone's rights respected, to remove hierarchical structure and to get the best from all members of the school/project community. It is important though, to clarify that, at Summerhill School, democracy is perceived as **a tool** to facilitate the day to day running of the school in accordance with its ethos and values. In fact, different types of democracy are implemented for different purposes and in some circumstances democracy is not implemented at all. That is because, the experience children are having is a priority and therefore, is not the school working to serve democracy but the other way round.

We appreciate that different schools/projects implement democracy to different extents and in different ways. Therefore, we want to help practitioners identify how democracy could be implemented in their setting, in a way that ensures the safety, well-being and natural development of the children whilst maintaining the stability of the school/project.

Ideologies

A.S.Neill Summerhill CIC strongly argues that schools and all areas where children live and learn should not become centres of indoctrination and imposition of specific mentalities, ideologies or beliefs. The values, ethos, practice and actions of an establishment, are, in effect, influencing children and also making a public statement of its angles. Therefore, adults should not try to further emphasise this by putting expectations on children. The latter should be allowed and trusted to develop their own morality and beliefs organically, at their own pace, through their life experiences and interactions with their social, cultural and natural environment.

Therefore, we encourage all practitioners working with us to focus on creating healthy and sincere environments for children which allow freedom of expression and choice and in

which children feel free and supported to safely engage with external affairs if they wish but are relieved from any explicit or implicit expectation to do so.