

Deep simplicity. The dangers of intervention in curriculum

Simplicidad. Los peligros de la intervención en currículum

Saville Kushner*
University of the West of England

Abstract

The article analyses the position of two important educational thinkers: A.S. Neill and L. Stenhouse. The author finds the radicalism of their position in their confidence to stand back, to see curriculum not as an intervention, but as a set of conditions for learning. Both theorists shared an educational principle: that complexity of intervention interrupted and did not guarantee the quality and the freedom of learning. They saw educational quality in terms of complexity –yes– but complexity situated elsewhere than in interventions. From these perspectives, the author questions the present educational situation, where he finds that the power of the “single narrative” to determine interactions is a general principle of social and political life.

Keywords: Radicalism, conditions for learning, educational principles.

Resumen

El artículo analiza el posicionamiento de dos importantes pensadores del campo educativo: A.S. Neill and L. Stenhouse. El autor encuentra el componente radical del posicionamiento de estos pensadores en su visión del currículum no como una intervención, sino como un conjunto de condiciones para aprender. Ambos comparten un principio educativo: la complejidad de la intervención no garantiza la calidad del aprendizaje, ni la libertad del aprender. Ellos conciben la calidad de la educación en términos de complejidad, una complejidad contextualizada en un espacio diferente de las intervenciones docentes. Desde estas perspectivas, el autor cuestiona el presente del mundo educativo, donde encuentra que el poder de la “narrativa única” para determinar las interacciones es un principio general de la vida social y política.

Palabras Clave: Radicalidad, condiciones del aprendizaje, principios educativos.

* Correspondencia con el autor:

Saville Kushner, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus/Coldharbour La Bristol BS16 1QY, Bristol, UK E-mail: saville.kushner@uwe.ac.uk

"If humanistic science may be said to have any goals beyond sheer fascination with the human mystery and enjoyment of it, these would be to release the person from external control and to make him less predictable to the observer..."

Maslow, *The Psychology of Science*.

The act of educating is simple. It consists of not intervening. What makes it complex is the need we feel to do things to children and young people, to structure their world.

An Extremist: A. S. Neill

Summerhill School was founded by A.S. Neill, a failed teacher, an amateur psychologist, an extremist. His extremist tendencies (Neill, 1973) were an expression of his total commitment to young people - "you are either for them or against them" he argued - there is no middle ground. His great insight was that acts of omission had greater educational and growth potential than acts of commission. The more the adult intervenes in the life of the child the greater is the danger of interrupting a preternatural tendency to develop positive social attributes and dispositions. Far from the bleak and paranoid fantasies of William Golding in *Lord of the Flies* (1990) children have a natural tendency to order and empathy. Left alone, children are driven by curiosity, experiment and collectivism.

Neill's thinking was no fantasy. He created Summerhill School. Until today, there lessons are voluntary. The school's day-to-day life is run by a parliament of children, older children put young children to bed at night unsupervised. The parliament has developed hundreds of rules - many of which regulate social life, but many of which also regulate educational life. For example, you are not allowed to use computers in the morning, since social networking might interrupt those lessons kids do want to attend. Teachers are not allowed to insist, or even encourage, children to attend lessons; they can be penalized by the parliament. It is not unusual for a young person to start school and not attend lessons for six months - sometimes even a year- though they eventually do. Even then, they attend a fraction of the lessons my children attend to in their State school. In any event, lessons only take place in the mornings, leaving afternoons for free association, which is, in fact, the routine of the school. If children choose to take State examinations they do and they are supported by teachers. Governmental inspections (even the infamous hostile inspection carried out in 1999 when often tried and failed to close the

school) show that Summerhill "kids" pass examinations at the national average level. The kids cram. Interestingly, there is no library in the school as "book-learning" could come at any time; Neill sought to concentrate on educational priorities. There is no need to agree.

There are many stories told about Summerhill School -and there are many stories that are not told. In spite of the free association at night times there has never been an allegation of child sexual abuse, nor a teenage pregnancy. There is no bullying in the school and never has been. There is a great deal of argument. The kids talk about how they learn social responsibility, relationships between individual and collective, what we now call *resilience*, scepticism and more -all through the constant conversation that passes between them as they build their tree-house, wander the grounds, sit in their rooms, collect for lunch, lounge around at bed-time. They say they are being educated.

All of this is not to say that there is no curriculum. The absence of books, of a regular teaching timetable, the scarcity of planned pedagogy, the complete absence of disciplinary measures, that there is no syllabus to speak of, merely removes from Summerhill the "furniture" of schooling. There is a curriculum. It is the school. To leave children alone is not to abandon them - Golding's absurd premise -. It requires you to create safe and nurturing conditions in which free association achieves educational quality. The school experience is the curriculum in that it is the *medium through which young people interact to position themselves ethically in the world of knowledge and action*. They build tree-houses, for the most part.

The Pragmatic Radical: Lawrence Stenhouse

Lawrence Stenhouse was Britain's leading curriculum theorist. While Neill was thinking *sui generis* Stenhouse had an intellectual lineage that reached back to the Philosophical Pragmatists including Dewey and Joseph Schwab, but also the british philosopher, David Hume. Pragmatism might best be thought of as *optimistic existentialism*. The focus is on the "here-and-now", but with less preoccupation with the void on either side and the absence of immediate meaning. The Pragmatists resolved the existential dilemma in action. If a thought has no consequence in the world of action, if it does not in some way advance possibility, then it is meaningless -or, rather, it can achieve no meaning. Dewey translated Pragmatism into educational action, with its centrepiece the teacher as public intellectual. Stenhouse similarly placed the teacher at the heart of

his educational passions. He had a sign above his desk at the University of East Anglia, both to declaim and to remind himself: “No curriculum development without teacher development”.

Like Dewey, Stenhouse (1975) saw the classroom as a “here-and-now”, an arena for action. In this, he departed from A.S. Neill who had little interest in regulated environments. The two never met – though they lived just 50 miles apart. But Stenhouse, too, was an extremist of sorts, a radical, which is to say, a man of commitment. For him, educational quality was to be found in pedagogical interaction. He was dismissive of preoccupation with outcomes – not dismissive of outcomes. For him, the goal was to transform young people into informed, free and independent voters. To make the individual less subject to external control. But this is an accomplishment, not an objective –to be hoped for, worked for, but not pre-specified. For Stenhouse, there was no predictability in the link between pedagogy and learning. Indeed, he rejected the idea that this relationship is causal. Teaching –the teacher– is a resource, not a determinant. Perhaps the best known words of Stenhouse (1975) are these: “education as induction into knowledge is successful to the extent that it makes the behavioural outcomes of the students unpredictable” (p. 42). The key element of that sentence is *to the extent that*. This is an aspiration towards which we can only progress.

Stenhouse advocated for a shift of attention from educational outcomes to the quality of process –a shift from learning objectives to what he called “principles of procedure”. Instead of *causality* (good quality teaching = good quality learning = good quality results), he was concerned more with *curriculum interaction* – i.e. creating a set of conditions within which students are able to develop independent judgement. The vehicles for this were classroom-based discussions and, most importantly, neutrality of the teacher. In the context of a discussion about, let us say, racism, the role of the teacher was to manage the quality of discussion and to provide appropriate learning resources. The teacher’s principal task was to multiply the range of narratives around a theme, supporting students and then stimulating the search for alternatives. What makes this role difficult to sustain is that the teacher’s neutrality extended to the substantive issue under discussion. If, for example, a student expressed a racist view, the teacher was not allowed to show disapproval. If, indeed, students left the discussion as confirmed racists, this, too, was not the business of the teacher – so long as that was a view forged through proper evidence-based deliberation. Of course, Stenhouse held the residual Pragmatist view that good quality deliberation would be sufficient to guarantee progressive moral outcomes – that racism would, in the end, yield to proper

scrutiny and contestation.

In advocating this, Stenhouse did not diminish the intellectual status of the teacher nor the complexity of the challenge they faced –on the contrary. For the teacher, maintaining a position of impartiality in high quality classroom discussion was a multifaceted challenge. It required personal insight and commitment, articulation of educational principles, careful negotiation with colleagues and managers, courage, facilitation skills, good and trusting relationships with students, good knowledge of substantive discussion themes, self denial and, above all, tolerance for epistemological uncertainty. Not to intervene, for Stenhouse, was the greater intellectual challenge.

But Stenhouse’s passion for teachers went even further. He developed classroom action research. Long before Donald Schön (1987) wrote his seminal book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Stenhouse had defined practice (pedagogy) as a process of enquiry. All classroom knowledge is a hypothesis to be tested in the cauldron of pedagogical exchange –teachers deal with provisional insight, they do not (as it is expected now) peddle second-hand certainties. At best –at Pragmatic best– they deal not with theory but with *theorising*. Hence, the purpose of classroom action research was for teachers to take control of the educational narrative: curriculum, its purposes, contents, relationships. And for that to happen, teachers had to be in control of “standards”. And principal among these was the intellectual autonomy of the student and the development of their independent judgement. To intervene with an authoritative view was a contravention.

Radicalism a Necessary Monster

The radicalism of the position of these important educational thinkers laid in their confidence to stand back, to see curriculum not as an intervention, but as a set of conditions for learning. They differed radically. Stenhouse (1975), like Dewey, believed in pedagogy and in the classroom as the laboratory for democracy. Instead, Neill was dismissive of classrooms and teaching. But they shared an educational principle: that complexity of intervention interrupted and did not guarantee the quality and the freedom of learning. Rather, both saw educational quality in terms of complexity –yes– but complexity situated elsewhere than in interventions. For Neill, educational complexity laid in the experience of the child as they struggled with coming to terms with a world dominated by adult values, resolved competing orthodoxies forced upon them by authority, and, not least, sought understanding of how to position themselves

in the world of peers. Stenhouse saw quality in the complexity of a teacher's experience as they entered into their own struggles to resolve organisational and political demands with their own educational values which, too often, are implicit, incipient. For both, the greater the determination of curriculum interventions, the more energy went into making complex those interventions, the greater the potential erosion of individualism and the greater the conditioning for external control. Predictability in learning outcomes was to be avoided at all costs. It was, therefore, prudent to intervene at the minimal level.

In terms of contemporary schooling, the challenge each author presents is possibly too great, the focus on schooling outcomes too solid and too politicised. We might argue for students to have free periods on their timetable to allow for free exchange and reflection, or for test-preparation to be suspended for long enough to allow for extended classroom conversation; for schools to create deliberative space and to give teachers career rewards for experimenting with pedagogical roles. We could –and should– be thinking critically about the new global fascination with behavioural conditioning and outcomes. We should return to questioning, as we used to, the difference between *education* and *schooling* and how to reunite them. We should be promoting a return to school-based curriculum development –striking a democratic balance between national curriculum principles and local curriculum determination, and stimulating public debate about the status and the role of the teacher as intellectual leader in society. As part of this, we should be reconsidering the founding of curriculum on disciplinary knowledge and shifting it towards domains of experience and the realisation of social ethics. We need a return to the kind of curriculum theorising in universities and in the teaching profession that allows a new Stenhouse and Neill to emerge: new partnerships between universities and school based not on trainee-teacher competencies, but on pedagogical theorising. Above all, we should be forging a new contract with young people which recognises, not just their rights, but the complexities they face and manage –with or without the support of the school, usually without. More than all of these, we could do more to simplify the conception of intervention.

The Contemporary Context: Narrative Control and Economic Identities

These are hard times. Fiscal austerity has become a political fetish across the world. Bankers and financiers seize the moment and, in the analysis of Michael Moore (*Capitalism: a Love Story*), stage *coups d'état* in the advanced economies. To do so they

create single, hegemonic narratives –such as that of “economic crisis”. These narratives capture the fear and the imagination of citizenries and institutions and achieve dominance. Acceptance of austerity, belief in balanced budgets, irrational fear of national “bankruptcy”, buying-in to economic identities (*consumers* and *clients* rather than *citizens*) – all these are conditioned by the power of the single narrative.

More corrosive still of democracy is that they control the narrative explanation of context, exert influence over the dynamics of interactions within that context –including relationships. Living under the chronic fear of economic collapse persuades people to act in certain ways, to measure their tolerances in particular ways, to engage with systems and ideas in ways that are dictated by the zeitgeist. Under the twin (related) narratives of economic well-being followed by economic collapse, we are persuaded to think of ourselves in economic relationship with others. For example, in the UK and the USA, each university professor is a “cost-centre”, expected to earn their salary, gaining esteem from senior managers for their capacity to earn. But think, too, about the parents of children who cannot afford to pay university fees for all. Do they choose which to send to university and when? Or children of parents who need institutional care which can only be paid with their inheritance, which would otherwise rescue them from economic vulnerability. What decisions are being conditioned by financial considerations? And then think on the broader scale of Western and advanced industrial economies that rely on the buoyancy of consumer spending with all the attendant pressures to consume exerted by politicians and the financial sectors. All these and more are examples of how our relationships with each other and with the State have been cast in economic terms –how we have bought into economic identities.

Here is evidence of how interactions in a context are governed by control of the narrative.

Control is tightened by the appropriation of language. The progressive vocabulary of social inclusion, entitlement, rights, autonomy is taken over as part of the technology of intervention. Alongside whole-class teaching, a national curriculum, punitive inspection and enforced consensus over educational goals comes *Personalised Learning*: an Orwellian trope, a conscription of critique, a requisitioning of the rebel. The National Curriculum is defined as an “Entitlement” curriculum, a treatment that is every pupil's right. But the line between coercion and entitlement is blurred. Since the Asian pupil in inner-urban industrial city, the farmer's daughter in the rugged highlands, and the wealthy child of a chic suburban lawyer all share the same entitlement to knowledge, this translates into a universal stipulation

and a universal teacher-proof formula for knowledge. Narrative control over the curriculum translates into a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum. Those who write the text-books become a wealthy educational elite.

I am saying here that the power of the “single narrative” to determine interactions in a context, is a general principle of social and political life, to be found at all levels of social exchange -including the classroom. Stenhouse understood the principle: that if the teacher controls the “narrative” of the curriculum then she controls curriculum interactions -i.e. how pupils interact with each other (competitively or collaboratively), how pupils interact with the teacher (through discipline or exchange) and how pupil and teacher interact with knowledge (mediated by authority or by scepticism). Indeed he distinguished between the teacher being *an* authority from the teacher being in authority- in the former, the teacher controls the narrative and exercises discipline; in the latter, the teacher offers herself as a knowledge resource. A.S. Neill famously enunciated the principle, “you are either for the child, or else you are against them” -there is no middle way. Neill relinquished all control over narratives and left individual students to elaborate their own.

In curriculum and classroom terms, the hardest narrative to lose is that of linear rationality. The denial of student agency comes in many forms, all aspects of a rational system that denies the student control over their movement, their association, the focus and purpose of their learning. We see this in what has been called *the grammar of schooling*, the system of rules, forms of organisation, use of time and other structuring devices (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). That students are sorted by age and grade, that classes are generally around 55 minutes long, that a school year numbers around 195 days, that ideal class size number around 30 students, that a solitary teacher stands in front of a class, all of these were determined with a long-ago historical purpose; in fact, at the turn of the 20th century. Sometimes the purposes had nothing at all to do with student learning and education. The common length of the school year, the school week and the duration of a lesson were determined as a base (the *Carnegie Unit*) against which to validate the claims of university professors to a pension.

As Tyack & Cuban (1995) show, the grammar of schooling has served to resist educational innovation and interdisciplinarity for more than a century. It has allowed this industrial model of schooling to be globalised -possibly more successfully than even the Catholic Church and on a par with flight booking technology. I write this article in England for a journal in Argentina -I will send it to a colleague in Indonesia and another in Tanzania. All, irrespective of cultural

and political diversity, will understand what is meant by “classroom”, “curriculum”, “instruction”, “teacher”. And not just because all cultures reproduce themselves through a few large people initiating many smaller people, but because the “grammar” of schooling -the furniture of a school day- has become a default mode of intervention in the lives of young people. The key value of this set of arrangements is productivity. The quality of learning is subservient.

Neill dismissed the grammar of schooling, Stenhouse undermined it with unpredictability. Neither could be contained in a highly structured organisational environment. Summerhill School remains unique and resists replication. Stenhouse’s curriculum experiment -with the teacher as neutral chair and young people arriving at their own judgement as to what counts as knowledge- stood as a beacon for a generation of teachers, but it was rejected by schooling’s immune system. The level of intellectual autonomy it gave to students was simply too challenging.

Austerity and Disaffection

But Neill and Stenhouse are out. Their ideas are historic. Austerity in ideas, in economy. The philosophical opulence of ideals of unlimited progress, the capital wealth implied by the child rights agenda both give way to the mean and relentless predictability of achievement. “Education as induction into knowledge is successful to the extent that it makes the behavioural outcomes of the students unpredictable”(Stenhouse, 1975:82) “Unpredictable”. A modern anathema. Narrative control dissolves in unpredictability. Pre-specification of learning outcomes is all. In England the system of national inspection ensures control with punitive consequences. Teachers have been required to write pre-specified learning outcomes on the black/whiteboard at the start of the lesson. Liturgy. Orthodoxy. There was a telling moment, after some years of extensive research into the modern phenomenon of “the disaffected pupil”. The educational research community realised in a collective moment of insight that pupils are not disaffected from school. They continue to go to school -there is no significant rise in truancy. But they are disaffected from a turgid, irrelevant curriculum whose control is so tightly held by interventionists. That it is beyond negotiation. Nor is there any escape (Elliott, 1998). The interventionists insist upon *inclusion*. There is no respite available through educational exclusion; no pupil can exercise the right *not* to attend class, as they do so productively at Summerhill.

A project. Artists and teachers work together to use creative enterprise to unlock curriculum control.

They seek “provocations”, hammers that break assumptions; teachers can see through the cracks. A moment. Two theatre artists are working with children of nine on improvisation. These are the potentially excluded children. They all stand in a circle. Inside the circle is (supposedly) *inclusion*; outside the circle is the symbolic *exclusion* –the non-society, the cast-outness. All pupils stand in the circle. One stands facing out. All others face in. Where is he facing? Whence comes the courage and insight that allows this act of supreme, subjective creativity? Where is he facing? The teacher showing the video is crying. This is a redemptive moment for her. The project enquires into exclusion. It turns out that for some – the marginal, the courageous, the “disaffected”– exclusion is a goal to be reached. Special Unit. Small class size. Other children at the end of the same arduous journey, away from curriculum control, away from punitive inspection, from pre-specified learning outcomes –away from the purview of the interventionist. The teacher cries. The artists reflect on their own disaffection and their admiring eye falls on that kid standing in the circle facing out. The journey the artist should make, the teacher should allow.

How do you escape the single narrative? Like Bhopal gas, it's the air you breathe even as you run away. So you create a new atmosphere –you make an Acampada. And what do the Acampadas do? They insist on public debate –they are committed, as a movement, to deliberation. They will not intervene in the curriculum of politics. They make no recommendations for voting. The outcomes they seek are unpredictable, accomplishments rather than objectives; consensus is corrosive to their fabric. They are classrooms of democracy. Up to now, you cannot intervene in an Acampada. They resist structure. Neill would feel comfortable in the contemporary Spanish plazas.

References

- Elliott, J. (1998). *The Curriculum Experiment: Meeting the Challenge of Social Change*. London: Open University Press.
- Golding, W. (1990). *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber and Faber
- Neill, A.S. (1973). *Neill! Neill! Orange Peel!* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Tyack, D. & Cuban. L. (1995). *Tinkering Toward Utopia: a Century of Public School Reform*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. London: MacMillan.