



Freedom to learn

Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.
Socrates

SPEAKING

- 1** Go back to your childhood. Try remembering the years of your primary school and your teachers, then answer the following questions.
- What was your schedule like? Timetable and subjects?
 - How old were your classmates? Were you all the same age?
 - How many pupils were there in your class?
 - What was your classroom like? Were you allowed to move around the room?
 - Who decided on school matters?

Summerhill Education

In 1921, A.S. Neill founded his own school. Summerhill he called it – a place where children could be free, could develop in their own way. Summerhill set an example for others to follow. His ideas deserve¹ a closer look.

The school grounds² stretch over³ six acres of the English countryside. Nearby lies the sleepy town of Leiston. A hundred miles to the south is London. A narrow road leads you to the entrance, past a sign reading 'Visitors Saturday Only'. A bell at 8.30 in the morning signals the first class. At forty five minute intervals it rings again, marking the class periods⁴ during the day. Attendance⁵ is, of course, optional. A tea and cookies break at 4.00 splits⁶ the afternoon. Some still go to a class or workshop after that, but most prefer to sprawl⁷ out on the grass.

For every ten pupils there is one teacher. The class size averages six. As a result, the motivated pupil makes rapid progress. The individual attention and the relaxed atmosphere between pupil and teacher make it a good learning experience. The teacher uses a strange method to break through to them.⁸ He gives the class freedom – he allows the children out of doors, lets them play, asks them what they want. And it works. The children discover joy, they blossom out,⁹ and they become hungry to learn.

Every Saturday night, the staff and pupils hold a general meeting. All school business, public and private, may be decided there. The assembled group discusses matters of concern,¹⁰ debates proposals, acts on rules of conduct. Everyone present has a vote. Even the younger children attend the meetings. They do not want anything passed behind their backs. They usually behave¹¹ – if they don't they get a gentle-but-firm escort to the door. The meeting usually breaks up in good-humoured disorder. Most stay for the dance that follows.

Neill believed in shaping the school to fit the child. The happiness of the pupil outweighed¹² all else. Summerhill has, in fact, shown remarkable success in producing happy children, self-confident, well-balanced personalities, socially well-adapted members of the human community.

Glossary

- deserve:** meritano
- grounds:** parco
- stretch over:** si estende per
- class periods:** ore di lezione
- attendance:** frequenza
- splits:** divide
- to sprawl:** sdraiarsi
- to break through to them:** aprirsi un varco, (qui) conquistare la loro fiducia
- blossom out:** fioriscono
- matters of concern:** questioni preoccupanti
- behave:** comportarsi (bene)
- outweighed:** superava (in importanza)

READING

- 2** Read the text about Summerhill education and fill in the chart below.

Schedule
Class and groups
Government of the school
Role of the parents
Teacher's methodology



A.S. Neill: life and ideas

Alexander Sutherland Neill was born in 1883 in Forfar, Scotland, and he was the son of a Scottish teacher who rejected the strict discipline and corporal punishment practised at the time. As a teacher, he visited Homer Lane's 'Little Commonwealth', a community for delinquent adolescents in 1917, and was impressed by its principles of self-government. In 1923, Neill moved to the town of Lyme Regis in the south of England, to a house called Summerhill. The school he founded continued there until 1927, when it moved to the present site at Leiston, in Suffolk.

Neill stressed¹ the innate goodness of children and urged² patience and trust so that they would learn for themselves. He said of his educational philosophy: 'I see that all outside compulsion³ is wrong, that inner compulsion is the only value.'

Neill's educational philosophy can be summed up in ten principles:

1. A belief in the basic goodness of the child.
2. Setting the happiness of the child as the goal of his education.
3. Responding to the emotional needs of the child, not just his intellectual ones.
4. Taking into account what the child wants, not just what others want for him.
5. Limiting discipline to a minimum.
6. Allowing freedoms, not license,⁴ and respecting the rights of others.
7. Making sure teachers are honest and sincere toward their pupils.
8. Encouraging children to be less dependent on their parents.
Making the school their home.
9. Avoiding giving the child guilt feelings.⁵
10. No teaching of any particular religious faith.



SPEAKING

- 3** Now compare your notes in exercise 2 to your school memories and discuss.
- a. Is the type of school described similar or different to the one you attended? How?
 - b. What kind of teacher do you think will be a Summerhill teacher?
 - c. Do you think this method could be applied in the Italian schools? Why? Why not?

WRITING

- 4** Make a comparison between Summerhill and traditional education. Make a list of their main principles and fill in the chart below.

SUMMERHILL EDUCATION	TRADITIONAL EDUCATION
<i>minimum discipline</i>	<i>discipline</i>
.....	<i>respond to intellectual needs</i>
.....
.....
.....
.....

- 5** Which one of Summerhill principles do you strongly disagree with? Why? Which one do you agree with? Why? Write a short essay about what you feel are the advantages and disadvantages of Summerhill education.

Glossary

1. **stressed**: sottolineò
2. **urged**: incoraggiò
3. **compulsion**: costrizione, obbligo
4. **license**: concessioni, permessi
5. **guilt feelings**: sensi di colpa