

**The Values of Summerhill**

Gabrielle Reece - V00912400

Faculty of Education, University of Victoria

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Dr. Graham McDonough

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A.S Neill's Summerhill School is where students can learn when they want and play when they want, students are self-governed and have to be self-disciplined if they want to learn, which is quite the opposite when compared to "typical" schooling, because of the significant differences between schools the question of "why" comes to mind. Why spend time learning about a school that has nothing to do with our future teaching occupations? Within this essay I will be answering the above question by discussing three values that can be taken from learning about Summerhill, the first being the importance of encouraging students to pursue happiness and authenticity, secondly, the impact of self governing and free education, and the third value is the significance of free time.

One of the biggest reasons why students have a difficult academic time in high school and further education is because they are taking classes they have no passion for or interest in, but instead are taking the courses so that they can be superficially successful, which the students believe is important because the idea of happiness through wealth is very prominent in society. While reading A.S Neill's *The Idea of Summerhill* and watching Dennis Miller's 1966 Summerhill documentary the aforementioned academic problem is nowhere to be found, this is because the instructors at Summerhill inform the students on their choices and encourage students to pursue happiness through doing something that they are passionate about and interested in. The idea of doing what makes you happy rather than doing things for superficial reasons is also prominent in how the Summerhill students talk about relationships. One of the female students states that friends who do not go to Summerhill "are much more false and there is always a sort of flirtation and trying to impress each other" (Miller, 17:37) whereas the actions of Summerhill students are authentic and are made because they truly

mean them. A.S Niell mentions that when he speaks to his students about sex and relationships he takes a “purely social attitude” (Miller, 19:38), where he informs the students on social ideologies surrounding the topic but does not state his own opinions. Extremely similar to how the instructors inform students on their choices but encourage students to pursue happiness, Niell’s social attitude allows for the students to make their own educated choices. I believe that this type of informative education is extremely valuable and is something that every teacher should use when talking to their students. If the generations to come are informed on their choices and taught to value authenticity, happiness, and passion driven success over wealth, appearance, and superficial success society as a whole is bound to be happier, more productive and more successful both academically and personally.

Similar to “typical” schools Summerhill students have a timetable full of classes, activities and projects but, unlike other schools, the offerings in the timetable are not compulsory, instead the timetable is made so that students can make informed decisions on how they can spend their day. With classes not being compulsory, students are independently responsible for their education, and as one of the students mentioned in Miller’s documentary studying is difficult at Summerhill because you need to have self-control and set away time to study/learn rather than having time allotted for you as there is in “typical” schools (Miller, 15:50). The free education that is described in the previous sentence has great impact on the students because it demands them to have self-control and self-discipline, which are both extremely useful tools to have in life but are often not taught in a typical school. Another feature that is unlike most other schools is the self-declared “democratic community of children and adults” ([summerhill.co.uk](http://summerhill.co.uk), n.d.) where students take on important roles such as chair-

man, secretary, fines officer, etc. Teachers and instructors play no major role in the government and are there to provide information to the students, meaning that the students make the rules, decide fair repercussions if the rules are broken, and resolve conflict amongst peers. From my understanding the responsibilities of self-governing positively impact the students by instilling a nature of leadership, confidence, problem solving, team work, and people skills. Self-governing and free education both have great values that can be used in “typical” schools, I believe if more teachers were to clearly explain the reasoning for rules and were to allow students to make their own classroom rules then less would be broken because the students would have a deeper connection with the rules and why they are in place. While free education is a little more difficult to translate into “typical” schools I do believe that it also has values that can be placed in “typical” classrooms, there are many different types of learners and if schools/classrooms were able to implement the introduction of various different types of lessons that taught the same subject then, most likely, more students would absorb the information better.

While the Summerhill school is evidently unique and has various, previously mentioned, features that can positively impact the academic and personal success of the students, there is still one valuable take away that has not been mentioned yet, and that is free time. Summerhill provides students with “free time that does not conflict with any timetabled lessons/activities” ([summerhill.co.uk](http://summerhill.co.uk), n.d.), allowing for students to take a break from their school work and any extra curricular activities to relax without experiencing the feeling that they should be doing something more productive with their time, as well also ingraining the idea to always make time for yourself. This allotment of time allows for the Summerhill stu-

dents, (those who choose to pursue academics), to step away from their work and do away with academic stress, which is extremely important in becoming academically successful. Whereas students in a “typical” high school education setting are expected to partake in eight to ten hours of sleep (CDC, 2020), seven and a half hours of education (Allard, 2008), and a total of forty-five minutes (which is below the recommended amount of time) to eat all meals (Allard, 2008), leaving students with approximately seven hours and five minutes to participate in physical activity, chores, travel, socialization, etc, assuming that every student has a quiet home environment, does not struggle with any of the academic subjects, and does not need to work. Students in Summerhill may also have the same amount of time allotted to academia, physical activity, and chores but Summerhill has made sure that the students are able to experience all of those things while also having time to relax. If it is not already clear, I believe that the guarantee of free-time should be implemented into the “typical” school day, as it provides students with places where they can interact with friends, take quiet time to themselves, create, and/or participate in physical activity, providing the students with stress-relief and allowing them to in-turn be more socially, personally, and academically productive/successful.

In conclusion and from my understanding, children who attend A.S Neill’s Summerhill School are positively impacted by three prominent Summerhill features. The first; encouragement to pursue happiness and authenticity which is provided to the students by the instructors teaches the students to value passion-driven success and personal satisfaction over superficial success. Second; the democratic community of children and adults, as well as the free-education structure of the school, both of which instills independence, leadership, team

work, and interpersonal conflict resolution skills. The third and final feature is the designated free-time which allows for the students to participate in non-academic activities and imprints on the students to always make time for themselves. Each of these three Summerhill features are extremely beneficial for students and should be considered valuable lessons to refer back to when working in future teaching occupations.

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