

# Reception of Arthur Sutherland Neill's pedagogical concept and his Summerhill School in Hungarian and German pedagogical literature and press

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**Abstract:** Arthur Sutherland Neill is one of the most debated personalities among the representatives of the classic reform pedagogy, due to his pedagogical concept and its practical realization, and his Summerhill School, equally. He is often mentioned during public debates, where mostly the “three S”—“sex, swearing and smoking”, are existing as subject of the debates. While analyzing publications about Summerhill School appearing in Hungarian and German pedagogical special literature and press, a kind of polarized attitude has been realized towards the conceptions and school: Some talk about him admiringly; others criticize him while emphasizing the concept's drawbacks and unique features.

**Key words:** reform pedagogy; Summerhill; the reception in theory of education and press

## 1. Arthur Sutherland Neill's pedagogical concept and his Summerhill School

One can pay attention to a kind of attitude which can be tracked in appeared exaggerates relating to the concept and the school in the Hungarian and German pedagogical special literature and press writings on Summerhill: On the one hand talks are admiring, on the other hand their negativities and unique features are emphasized and criticized. Before revealing Neill's reception, it is important to present shortly in detail the entire concept though the school's practical function.

### 1.1 Neill's pedagogical conception

Neill's pedagogic concept is defined by psychoanalytical tendency represented by Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich. Neill stood upbringing by free, since he declared that the sexual taboos, sexual suppression and the prohibition of the masturbation yield anxiety, which has deleterious effect on the children and causes the development of the aggression and the violence. He believed that children are originally good, and nobody is born for evil or aggressive one, but the upbringing and the society make it.

Children must grow up in freedom, though Neill's educational aim was the realization of the children's self-adjusting (his own daughter, Zoë grew up as a self-adjusting child). The freedom does not mean libertinism, however, it should not to be mixed up with the laissez fair upbringing, as Neill's critics do misinterpreting Neill's freedom concept often, according to which children may not offend the freedom of others with their freedom and may not jeopardize their and the others' corporal integrity on the one hand, naturally, they have an opportunity to be allowed to be themselves on the other hand.

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The adults and the children are equal, in the real sense of the word (not an unreal equality rules between the teachers and pupils, as it can be experienced in the schools), because of this, the education renounces the authoritarianism, the adult management and suggestive influence in the upbringing (in a religious and ethical look, as well) (Neill, 2005).

### **1.2 The Summerhill School**

The Summerhill School, which Neill founded in Leiston, England, in 1921, is the first free school. His aim of founding the institute was to tailor the school to the children, not to tailor the children to the school. It worked as an experimental school of antiauthoritarian upbringing when started, but it works as a demonstrational school today. As it is usual in England, this school is a boarding institution, which is attended by young people at ages of 5-16. The lessons are obligatory only for teachers, so the students have right to decide what and when they want to study, due to this, it is not obligatory to attend school lessons. Unique methods, which would be typical of Summerhill School, are not applied on the lessons. Similarly to other reform-pedagogical conceptions, they disregard the gradation, even so, there is no failings in the oral assessment at all. Neill emphasized the significance of acquisition through free games instead of the curriculum, in the childhood learning. The children have a number of opportunities to take part in activities apart from the lessons (e.g., workshops, gardening, riding and dramatic society), in which they are for interest than for learning—in the traditional sense.

One of the most characteristic elements of the school's function is the local government, members of which are children and teachers, they are equal and both have the right to vote. This assembly decides the questions concerning the school (except the teachers' uptake and dismissal and the financial affairs). There are approximately two hundred rules, which concern equally the children and adults, and the local government brings them on the base of voting. The assembly decides what should be the punishment in case of the contravention of valid rules in the school (Neill, 2005).

## **2. Reception of Neill's pedagogical conception and Summerhill School in Hungarian pedagogical special literature and press**

Neill's pedagogical concept and his Summerhill School exist among the less negotiated and researched reform-pedagogical concepts in the Hungarian pedagogical literature and press, which influences his reputation largely in the field of pedagogy among experts, researchers and educators.

### **2.1 Peter Foti's papers on Summerhill in Hungarian**

Peter Foti, who is one of Summerhill enthusiastic fans, writes in Hungarian, gives lectures and attends radio talks, where the topic is the free schools, mainly focus is on Summerhill School. He is an electrical engineer, but he studied pedagogy and worked for "Országos Pedagógiai Központ" (National Center for Pedagogy). He lived in Austria and dealt with alternative pedagogic movements (Foti, 2008), recently. Because of this, his writings cannot be enumerated to the pedagogical special literature. After Neill's publication of his book *Summerhill—A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* in Hungarian, Foti in his writings (2004, 2005, pp. 75-87; 2005, 2006, pp. 28-37), radio talks (2005) and lectures (2007) talked about Summerhill and Neill's pedagogical concept with ecstasy; by his own acknowledgement, Summerhill is Foti's kind of beloved school and, his own child would have attended this school if it would not be in England (Foti, 2006). This reflects his enthusiasm and criticizes neither the concept, nor the school.

In Foti's papers on Neill's conception and Summerhill, one may face expressions often like,

“Neill, as a radical scholar of theory of education”; “On Neill’s opinion, freedom without libertinism is a revolutionary conception”; “Schools do not go away in radicalism to Summerhill” (Foti, 2005; 2006);

and on his opinion,

“Neill differs from the rest of the reform educators, because he wants to reform not only the teaching, but the entire school” (Foti, 2005).

It is important to emphasize that Foti, in his writings, does not affect Neill’s views on childhood’s sexuality and masturbation.

### **2.2 Valeria Majzik: *Summerhill—What We Shall Do With It?***

Majzik’s (1997) paper entitled “Summerhill—What We Shall Do With It?” appeared in a Hungarian pedagogical journal *School Culture (Iskolakultura)* eight years before the publication of Neill’s (2005) book *Summerhill—A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*. Already, the title itself “Summerhill—What We Shall Do With It?” shows a sort of perplexity: Place of Summerhill can be found difficultly in the row of the reform-pedagogy concepts, due to its individuality and radicalism, it can be less assigned into the usual reform-pedagogy categories. Opposite to Peter Foti’s views, Valeria Majzik’s approaches about Summerhill and Neill’s concept are with objectivity and critical outlook. Acknowledging advantages of the Neill’s notion of school, she stressed that, “It is not possible to use it fully (the concept) for the school’s reformation”, “(school) isolation and the compelling strength of implementation of the concept”, as to the school works as a boarding institution. On Majzik’s views, Neill errs into extremities in connection with his theories of learning: He rejected the course books, certain expected knowledge and lessons (Majzik, 1997). The author of the study confronts the objectives of the traditional pedagogy, “Which is taking aim at fixing the child”, when it presupposes that the child is bad, it is necessary to improve it—with Neill faith in children’s original goodness. She interpreted Neill’s pedagogy as a radical turning against the traditional pedagogy which causes its isolation (“pedagogical island-existence”) (Majzik, 1997).

### **2.3 Bruno Bettelheim: *Summerhill: For and Against***

However, although who is not a Hungarian author, it can be read in the study of Hungarian Bruno Bettelheim which appeared in 1973, in the anthology named “Pedagogies on the Turn of the Millennium”, entitled *Summerhill: For and Against*. Commenting Neill’s activity, Bettelheim emphasized the fact that many people misunderstand Neill’s thoughts and apply his educational principles, school, his teachings inadequately. Bettelheim saw the reason of this in Neill’s readers’ lawsuit concept, views and how they interpret the readings.

In the study, Bettelheim accepted Neill’s hypotenuse educational concept, however, he criticizes it on some points: “The explanation of the ‘big clinician of the upbringing’ is inaccurate and naïve; he avoids theoretical questions”, and calls the readers’ attention to that, “It is necessary to apply Neill teachings flexibly since if we take it according to a word we make a fool of him”. He considered that the school’s successfulness depends on a person, since “Summerhill is nothing else than extension of his own (Neill’s—author’s comment) personality”. Bettelheim also presupposed that it would not lead to success if a man with a smaller format would try to apply Neill’s educational method, and its consequence will be chaos. He justified this hypothesis by Neill’s considerable deficiencies regarding to the psychoanalysis, which he could counterbalance with his child respect (Bettelheim, 1998).

Bettelheim disagreed with Neill’s views on sexuality, too. Accordingly to Bettelheim’s opinion, neither the repressed sexuality, the prohibition of the masturbation, nor the remorse derived from this are the agents of violence and aggression (Bettelheim, 1998).

#### **2.4 Judit Benda: *Where Freedom is Not a Utopia***

Benda's (2007) article entitled "Where the Freedom Is Not a Utopia" appeared in the 1st number of a daily newspaper *Nepszava (People's Voice)* in September of 2007, in connection with the beginning term of the September. She dyed an idyllic and positive picture about Summerhill for the reader, "Summerhill School presumably is the world's most cheerful school", where to go on lessons is not obligatory, it is possible to play with interest or to take part in an interesting activity, the children may decide freely, etc.. She emphasized the school's main characteristic is not only opposite to the traditional sense of learning, to the accentuation, the importance of learning through activities selected freely, but contrasts it with the rest of the alternative schools, according to which, "They only sweeten the bitter pill, for example, they study playing what does learning mean, the emphasis is always on the learning yet though, if I like it, if not".

Benda considered the school's only drawback that it is a private institution and it is necessary to pay tuition fee, "For this, only the wealthier families' children may be given the utopia" (Benda, 2007).

### **3. Reception of Neill's pedagogical conception and Summerhill School in the German pedagogical special literature and press**

There is much more interest towards Neill's pedagogical concept and his school in Germany than in Hungary. The entirely different from usual school practice, received bigger publicity, primarily in the national sheets and journals.

#### **3.1 Doreen Hunger: "Sexual Pedagogy in Summerhill (Sexualpädagogik in Summerhill)"**

Doreen Hunger's paper entitled "Sexual Pedagogy in Summerhill" appeared in 2004 deals with questions affecting the sexuality in Neill's educational concept. She undertook the clarification of misinterpretations and misunderstandings around the taboo-free treatment of sexuality. After the short presentation of basic principles of anti-authoritarian upbringing in Summerhill, she negotiated questions like Neill's ideas on sexuality, including his thoughts on childhood sexuality in comparison with Sigmund Freud's views about childhood psychosexual development, the treatment of masturbation in Summerhill, the sex education, the nakedness, the pregnancy, the abortion and the questions of the homosexuality (Hunger, 2004).

#### **3.2 Reflections on doctrine supervision examination concerning Summerhill School, in German press**

The obvious difference among the appeared writings and articles in Hungarian and German is that the repeated doctrine supervision examination concerning Summerhill School created any kind of stir in Hungary while it found a considerable interest in the German press. The articles, according to this, appeared in time of the scandals around the school's doctrine supervision examinations in more considerable journals in Germany.

The England Office for Standard in Education (OFSTED) was established for controlling the execution of the detailed central curriculum. OFSTED is independent from the state office concerning former teachers and non-educators. The office examined—in case of non-state schools (These do not receive a state support in England)—whether the children receive suitable treatment and study in proper circumstances. They entrusted the schools of choosing the philosophical bases of the education and the educational methods. From 1990, Summerhill really aroused OFSTED interest and the doctrine supervision examination was made almost annually (Coiplet, 2000). The doctrine supervision has disapproved of the state of the buildings and the preparedness of the teachers' teaching at the school in 1990 already (Der Spiegel, 1994).

One may have read about Summerhill in 1994 in several German newspapers, when the doctrine

supervision—according to the expectations of conservative educational policy tendency (they wished to return to the good old school)—made a newer examination in Summerhill (Welt, 1994; Frankfurter, R., 1994; Frankfurter, A. Z., 1994; Der Spiegel, 1994; dpa-Dienst, 1994). The doctrine supervision disapproved the foulmouthed speech, the lag of the students' school successfulness from state institutions' students, and that the children were absent too much from the lessons (Der Spiegel, 1994). The school received serial examinations under the Blair-government's time from 1997, which was visible in the increasing number of the articles appeared in press on Summerhill. The school got an ultimatum in 1999 as the result of the doctrine supervision's examinations. The report objected that the children have been confusing the idleness with the practice of the personal freedom, and their knowledge of that was fractional. Their criticism was directed against Summerhill's fundamental philosophy, the free school visit (Jammers, 1999). Due to OFSTED's recommendations, the school's closure was ordered with reason of neither upbringing nor education is fruitful in the school. Present headmaster (Neill's daughter, Zoë Readhead) is in the interest of keeping school from closure, she have applied to the courts, where she gained a lawsuit. According to the decision, the doctrine supervision has not had the school closed and decreased the illegally frequent examinations onto the usual visits in every fifth year (Coiplet, 2000).

### **3.3 Summerhill in German press**

The most often-used attributes, related to the school and its educational concept, are “the radical one, most radical, revolutionary, liberal”, in writings in German, as it was visible in Hungarian, too. Reporting articles on Summerhill can be divided 2 groups in Germany. The bigger part of the writings, independently from date of appearance, informs about the school life and children admiringly, dyeing an idyllic and harmonic picture about Summerhill.

An article entitled “Die Freiheit ist das rascal” (The freedom the best one), which appeared in issue 16 of the daily newspaper *Der Spiegel* in November of 1998, manifests from the other writings, showing a distressing and negative picture of the institution: The school's buildings are “lived barracks”, “the children dowdy, pale, they are bored and they do not know what to do with themselves”. The teachers “earn half of their colleagues teaching at other schools, the empty classroom, or lesson held for an only student frustrates them; they live in caravans”. The students' achievement was low; they do not make a career as an adult but some kind of creative work. The article presents the local government's work in an ironic key, where “the imposed punishment is paprika-cutting in the kitchen, in fair weather” (Zuber, 1998).

An article, also appeared in German newspaper *Der Spiegel* on May 7th, in 2007 about Summerhill School, writes at a more tactful voice. Readers get a picture from both negative and positive sides and the editorial goes into detail about doctrine supervision scandals and the lawsuit. It makes people see Summerhill through eyes of visitors and entrusts the parents, the reader, to shape own opinion based on their views and experiences. The judgment of the school's educational principles and practice depends absolutely on individual, what they expect from education and the school, and what is interpreted by them as education (Ehlers, 2007).

## **4. Summary**

The common features of writings both in Hungarian and in German literature are using of attributes “radical one”, “revolutionary”, “most radical”, the usage of word “liberal” in connection with Neill educational concept and Summerhill School. A further common feature is that, writings, presenting Summerhill's activity positively, dominate and in those works with a scientific claim, where Neill's (2005) views and his school are dealt with a

critical outlook, its positive results and his features are emphasized and acknowledged.

There is a dissimilarity between the German and Hungarian press materials that in Hungarian—only with the exception of Peter Foti's sentence referring to Summerhill lawsuit in a single writing—It cannot find indications concerned the continuous doctrine supervision affecting school examination, its closure, the judicial lawsuit keeping it from. Neither though writings in Hungarian, nor in German language (exception Hunger's (2004) *Sexual-pedagogy in Summerhill*) mentioned Neill's views on childhood sexuality.

Additionally, it is worthy to examine henceforward how the educators' attitude is forming toward a kind of reform-pedagogy concept like this, which is connected with negative manifestations, attacks, as well as those of concepts that concern elements like taboo-free of sex education; a wholehearted emancipation between children and adults; the not-obligatory education; with which for persons, living in the Christian-European culture, to identify is presumably heavy.

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