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Can Liberal Education Make a Comeback? The Case of "Relational Touch" at Summerhill School

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This article draws on data from a single element of a larger project¹ which focused on the issue of "touching" between education and child care professionals and children in a number of settings. This case study looks at a school once internationally renowned as the exemplar of "free" schooling. The authors consider how the school works as a community, how it impacts on its students, and how it copes with the strictures of the audit culture in relation to "risk" and "safety." The authors' experiences led them to the realization that physical "touch" was an irrelevant focus in this school, and they developed the notion of "relational touch." Summerhill works in ways that approximate an inversion of the audit culture. The authors argue that progressive and critical conceptions of education continue to have much to learn from concrete examples like Summerhill and conclude that a revival of such values in education is long overdue.

KEYWORDS: Summerhill School, relational touch, educational reform, educational policy, qualitative research

It is well known that education is subject to recurrences. Over the last thirty years, school education has been increasingly directed toward economic instrumentality, policed in the United Kingdom and elsewhere by the audit culture. The spaces for alternative versions of educational provision are now heavily constrained. However, Summerhill still offers one such alternative and an exemplar of a possible liberal comeback. We begin by sketching briefly the history and current context of the school. It was founded in 1921 by A. S. Neill, whose work on education and child development was of international repute especially in the 1960s and '70s when it became a "transatlantic cult" (Skidelsky 1969, 15). Neill's publications have never been out of print in Japan, and are now being reprinted in the United States and United Kingdom (Ayers 2003; Vaughan 2006). Neill was interested in practice not theory, and Summerhill was his exemplar. The school is fee-paying, has charitable status, and is located on the edge of a small town in rural East Anglia, England. Currently describing itself as "the oldest child democracy in the world"

(www.summerhillschool.org) the school remains remarkably unchanged in its ways of self-government since Neill's time. It is a predominantly residential "free" school, one much inspected and criticized down the years by the relevant Government Inspectorates in England. In 1999 Her Majesty's Inspectorate tried to close down the school, lodging a series of objections that the school was forced to challenge legally in order to remain open and true to its principles. Ending the policy of voluntary attendance at lessons has been the government's enduring target. State coercion failed in that instance, and since then the school has prospered. Indeed, a recent Social Services Inspection report praised the school's "very high" levels of student satisfaction (CSCI 2005). The conservative *Telegraph* newspaper contrasted today's Summerhill with the Commission for Social Care Inspection's criticisms of leading English private schools: "some boarding schools may be wondering today whether A. S. Neill was not on to something after all" (Claire 2005). The current roll (eighty) includes children from age four to sixteen, from countries as varied as the United Kingdom, United States, Germany, Holland, Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. The core of the school is the Meeting,² where students and staff, on a one-person-one-vote basis, decide how the school will be run.³ The school has obvious affinities with Deweyan schools, in its experience-centered rationale and emphasis on democratic government, and served as a model for over six hundred such free schools in the United States in the 1960s and '70s. To the school's knowledge, none of these off-shoots exist now, although of course related "free schools" endure minimally.

Summerhill School was one case study from six in our research, designed to explore the issue of touch between professionals and children. It was selected because we anticipated, on the basis of previous research experience in the school, that Summerhill could be seen as being at one end of

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Both authors specialize in qualitative research and the relation between theory, methodology, and practice, and were motivated to do the research (ESRC RES000220815) which comprised a series of case studies and an examination of audit regimes, as a result of professional fears around touching children. The research has evoked various personal responses including writing a number of articles (one extending a theorization of touch drawing on the work of Derrida and Nancy), and one book, *Don't Touch! The Educational Story of a Panic* (2008). More widely, the research has led to considerable media coverage in the UK and elsewhere, and the authors hope that this coverage along with the various publications will eventually help change current professional "no touching" practices, and a reconsideration of more liberal educational approaches.

a continuum, a school generally thought to be less regulated, where students were part of a self-governing community. In other settings we had become familiar with a number of injunctions which included always having a second adult to witness intimate care routines, minimizing cuddling young children, and even requiring particular ways of doing this, such as the sideways cuddle (to avoid any full-frontal contact). Such concerns will be familiar to many as they have been discussed in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in terms of a moral panic (Tobin 1997), a product of risk society (McWilliam and Jones 2005), and as a consequence of a litigious culture (Furedi 2002). As a result, many child-orientated arenas are rapidly becoming "no touch" zones (see Johnson 2000, for example). However, even though others have noted difficulties relating to touching behaviors, as far as we were aware, our research was unique in terms of both scope and focus.

The Summerhill ethnographic case study was based on extensive prior knowledge, beginning with an evaluation of the educational nature of the school and the accuracy of a 1999 government inspection. This resulted in the official "complaint" that the school resisted in a tribunal case heard in March 2000. This evaluation (Stronach et al. 2000) involved twenty-four days of fieldwork in the school, an examination of all prior inspections including the relevant audit documentation, Neill's various writings, and a review of available literature such as an extensive concurrent appraisal by education experts (Cunningham et al. 1999). The evaluation was undertaken on the strict understanding that it would be independent, and offered no guarantee of support to the school. The findings were variously represented to the tribunal by Stronach and Thomas as "expert witnesses." The government withdrew from the case after three days, and the case is reported by Stronach (Vaughan 2006; see also Stronach 2002). Subsequently, as part of the tribunal agreement, Stronach was appointed by the school to accompany any subsequent inspection and further data was collected in this way. The most recent data involved two researchers in eighty hours of observation in 2005, as well as conducting subsequent telephone interviews and undertaking a document review. Observational opportunities included: play, hanging about outside (staff and students), lessons (all classes were observed at least once), the Meeting (twice), staff meeting, and meal times. The researchers had unrestricted access. We interviewed the principal, all members of the teaching staff, more than half of the students individually or in small groups, dinner ladies, and administrative staff. Selection of students was serendipitous. Anyone we met outside, in the dining hall, in the classrooms, corridors, any open space, we invited for interview, and none refused unless they were busy. All interviews were unstructured, taped, and transcribed, and all written material intended for publication has been negotiated (although no changes were requested) with the principal who has given permission for the school to be named. The school's own data from a parental survey was additionally made available to us.

The approach to data analysis combined a deconstructively inflected "grounded" approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Stronach and MacLure 1997; Stronach 1997) with a sensitivity to metaphors, concepts, and theories

concerning “self,” learning, and schooling (Bernstein 1971; Foucault 1977; Goffman 1990 [1963]). The approach is deconstructive rather than analytical, treating boundaries not as the end of something but as a beginning. Such boundaries involve combinations of contradictory or opposing notions, such as “working dystopia,” “learning swarm,” “passion” combined with “neutrality,” “benign panopticon,” and so on. These are generative oxymorons, characterized by the sorts of *aporia* that philosophers of difference attend to. Hence they are a deconstructive way of thinking about data. In practice this involved all data being transcribed, read and analyzed by both researchers; “emerging themes” were identified, such as “floating pronouns,” and the plethora of boundaries that divided the school from the town, the researchers from the students, the classroom, and the learning context of the school. The strength and weakness of these various boundaries informed the development of “grounded” notions such as “learning swarm,” “relational touch,” and various relations of “inside” and “outside.” These emerging themes in turn provoked “emerging theory” and selective reading around these themes, drawing for example on Goffman in relation to the self and identity, Foucault in relation to notions of the panopticon, and Deleuze in relation to conceptualizing a space where learning was complex, informal, and highly relational.

These theories enabled alternative readings and conceptualization of the data—such as the notion of “benign panopticon” both an acknowledgment and an inversion of Foucault’s notion as well as underlying philosophies of difference (Deleuze 1994), the latter particularly in relation to the play of “inside” to “outside” and the constitutive role of both strong and weak boundaries in constructing the school as a “learning swarm.” “Relational touch”⁴ emerged as part of a “progressive focusing” (Parlett and Hamilton 1977) on data relating to relationships within the research context. The original focus on exploring physical touch at Summerhill was displaced by a realization that such touch was a banal concern. The nature of Summerhill made it obvious that touch is merely one aspect of other social, organizational, cultural, and ethical features of the environment in which it occurs. Summerhill did not fit current sociological or educational models of analysis hence we could only understand touch if we explored Summerhillian practices of the self, the other, the community, the culture—and the mutual reproduction of all these. We adopted a broadly inductive approach to understanding the nature of the case, and turned conventional theories of schooling upside down in order to better match the constructions of self, empowerment, and learning in the setting.

We consider this case helps to demonstrate what schools can be when based on principles that allow the learner to be central to the learning process rather than when they are based on current paradigms of instrumental education and a preoccupation with accountability (e.g., business models of effectiveness or continuous improvement). Therefore, understanding the characteristics of this unusual case and their relationships to the problematics of “touch” offers an instructive contrast to such issues in the wider social and educational context. Achieving this specific understanding provoked both self-criticism as researchers and interpretive flexibility en route.⁵ We acknowledge that as

researchers our relation was an outside-in one (see conclusion). But there were elements of the inside-out given that one researcher had been appointed by the school as their expert witness (see above). As some of the data below suggest, Summerhillians tended to accept us in terms of the weak boundaries.⁶ The school is rightly sensitive to outside representations, which have often taken the School for Scandal line as a typical media starting point. Readers nevertheless need to consider the impact of that relation between researchers and school in interpreting this account, and we are of course conscious that any picture of Summerhill will only be one version of the life of the school, but we hope that it will have a powerful educative value outside the school, as well as a certain representational warrant within it.

Getting into Summerhill

The easiest way to interpret Summerhill is to succumb to its difference. It is democratic while schools are generally autocratic. There is an egalitarian relation between adults and children. The school refuses orthodox boundaries and regulation. It rejects compulsion in relation to attendance at lessons, examinations, assessment, and even report cards to parents. It is exotic and so we read it, easily or uneasily, against our prejudices. Our own unease on our first visit to the school as part of the touch project was triggered by a newspaper we chanced upon: "Jacko's Lair: Bed Where He 'Groped' Teen Gavin" read the headlines of the marked "school" copy (Daily Mirror 2005). It lay in the dining room and was flipped through by teachers during breaks, while we grew increasingly anxious about our questioning in relation to touch at Summerhill. It felt ridiculously narrow and somehow sexualized. Our singular focus was reminiscent of the inspectorate's preoccupation with students not attending lessons in the 1999 inspection (HMI/OfSTED 1999), when students complained that they were only asked how often they attended lessons. We seemed as obsessed as the inspectors, and about an even *more* dubious subject. We observed children throwing snowballs at each other, giving each other a piggy-back across the snow, occasionally hugging, play-punching a teacher on the arm, writing sponsorship amounts on a sheet propped against a teacher's chest, and so on. But as we asked about adults touching children, children touching each other, adults touching adults, it felt a bit "pervy" as a subject for conversation, an attempt to un-naturalize what the subjects regarded as absolutely normal.

Troubling Touch

Our discomfort extended to writing up field notes—"how do you say they 'rubbed against one another' (two Taiwanese girls) or 'he put his hand on her thigh' . . . without immediately being in a sexual register?" (field note). What was the overall source of our uneasiness? It seemed that asking such questions carried a sexual innuendo that became more prominent as the field-work continued. In a 2001 mini-inspection of the school, the government inspector had drawn attention to "inappropriate touching" when a teacher gave a piggy-back to a small child. Asked what touching *was* appropriate, the

inspector's answer was unequivocal: "no touching." What we were doing as researchers felt like another case of "inappropriate touching," and asking questions about touching in Summerhill felt contaminating. But why?

Such questioning about "touching" raises the possibility of the unwanted—whether sexual, physical, or verbal (the verbal being performative in these registers). It opens a space for inquiry that is simultaneously innocent and complicit. It is innocent in that it can be represented as a deliberative, moral space where questions can be asked on one side or the other and where moral decisions can be reached (e.g., What forms of touching exist in this situation? How are they sanctioned? What boundaries exist and how are they argued?). But that even-handed possibility is contained within the form of a space that has already raised the possibility of the sexually transgressive or illicit. So the space is innocent in relation to content, but already complicit in terms of form and place. This is because respondents tended to say that such concerns "had not crossed their mind" or were not even conceivable in the cultural context of Summerhill where Ombudsmen and the Meeting empowered children to air any misgivings. As someone said during our visit, Summerhill would be a "pedophile's nightmare"⁷—there were no private places, there were no adult powers of sanction over the child, children were in charge of the place in ways that were not tokenistic, the Meeting was a forum for the raising of grievances. The contrast with those forms of "innocence" and the research project's concerns made us feel contaminating (and contaminated) because we introduced these possibilities in the form of our inquiries about touching:

The contamination of form and place is prior to all adjudications of appropriate content—and so both accusation and self-guilt precede the "trial." Ontological guilt (where do these questions come from?) overrides existential consideration (what are the pros and cons of this case?) for those who inquire about touch in such situations. (research memo)

So the *Daily Mirror* headlines about Michael Jackson provoked a Kafkaesque dilemma. They symbolized the contaminating guilt that preceded any "offence" and stood as an analogy for our own research headlines about "touching," however differently we might want to place our own allegiances. Purity and prurience kept changing place.⁸ They posited touch precisely in its moral panic terms, which is where the potency of our research question comes from: adult power over child innocence = "groping" = sexual perversion = Michael Jackson personified, at least as presented in the tabloids. Summerhill (both adults and children), in contrast, seemed to deal with bedtime arrangements in a different sort of way—pragmatically:

Law 13: For House and below, BOs [Beddies Officers] have to check with Houseparent before people can sleep in each others rooms; Law 17: If you are camping out you have to come to bedtime, tell your houseparent/BO where you are and who you are with; and Law 39: No-one can go in the Cottage [youngest] bedtime room without a Cottage kid.

There is a contrast here between the practical management of risk of whatever kind (most likely to be nuisance or petty theft in Summerhill situations) and the inspector's anticipatory prohibition of the very possibility of error or even mistaken perception, always conceived as implicitly sexual in nature (i.e. "no touching"). It was interesting that when we presented those sorts of "outside world" scares (e.g., no adult and child together in an otherwise solitary situation) and explained the rationale to older Summerhill students, they looked astonished, and said: ". . . if they don't trust in the teacher to actually be on their own with students then that's just pathetic."

Policing Touch

More broadly, we might wonder how the media both form and fill these touch spaces. In Summerhill, the *Mirror* and its headlines are seen to be irrelevant to the practices of the school, and to its concerns in terms of "risk," "security," etc. Yet there is now an exception, introduced by the audit culture. The staff receives obligatory "child protection" training and inspection days, and consider some of it irrelevant to what goes on in Summerhill (for example: "What would you do if a parent came up to school smelling of alcohol?" In a boarding school not a very relevant example, as a teacher pointed out). But teachers in Summerhill tend not to wonder too much how things might be perceived elsewhere. One houseparent considered what "boundary" might be appropriate to her dealings with the youngest children in the school. The notion of "not touching" was inconceivable, but she obliged us by finding a boundary: "I wouldn't take them into the bath with me, as I would my own kids."

Another major difference from other schools is that students propose and police laws to ensure the proper running of the school, privacy, and the rights of individuals. These laws are decided democratically, with each child and teacher having one vote. They address specific problems as they arise, rather than envisaging possible problems in terms of universal prescription. Even the School Laws have numerous specific exceptions. For example, Law 48: "Freddy can have a stick bigger than him." In the wider social context, however, policy and practice is highly affected by real or imagined media concerns and it might be argued that both the morality of the media and its simultaneous pornography are reliant on each other. "Bums 'n' tits"⁹ presumably promote a kind of visual "groping" that papers simultaneously decry in relation to "Jacko in the Sacko," yet at the same time the titillation of the self-same story serves as a pornographic refueling that both cancels and makes possible the moral condemnatory tone. Each feeds off the other. Both are performative together in that they "sell." So the *Mirror* and its "Wacko Jacko" headlines are an irrelevance at Summerhill in a way that they might not be in other schools. Touch, therefore, is not a sensitive issue there—and indeed appeared a ridiculous intrusion when we brought it up. And as the bringers-up, we became unwilling agents of the same sexualized culture of "risk" that we were committed to investigate impartially, even though there was no impartiality out there for us to adopt. We came away from our first

field trip feeling in parts both guilty and silly. As outsiders, we felt contaminating, but that was part of the data: we were objects in transit across Summerhillian boundaries that we could begin to feel in terms of their difference, but not yet understand.

Summerhill Outside-In

Summerhill is an almost perfect panopticon, incapable of secrets: “. . . I’m watchful, I’m always watchful, I’m watchful about everything here. I watch all the time and sometimes I would just think to myself I’ll watch a little bit more, but it doesn’t really mean that I think anything is going to happen” (principal). The children believe that they have “secrets” but staff feel otherwise “. . . there are no secrets, so it [abuse] couldn’t happen . . . everything goes to the Meeting and is spoken about and sorted” (teacher). No secrets also means not pretending to be someone you’re not and having to be “yourself”:

Interviewer: Why can’t you pretend to be whoever, like you can outside [i.e. outside Summerhill]?

Student: Because everybody will know you’re not yourself and you’re around people all the time, and you kind of live here, and it’s like a big family and you know everybody.

It’s hard to maintain a “secret” self, even, and no place for issues of “face.”

The Benign Panopticon

So without intending anything negative, we suggest that Summerhill is a very precise and reliable mechanism for the social manufacture of selves. In case that sounds soulless, bear in mind that it manufactures those as well, for it is a moral laboratory. It is a total institution with boundaries both invisible and powerful—school students/“downtowners,”¹⁰ locals/Summerhill cosmopolitans,¹¹ limits to parental visits,¹² and hidden definitions of normal/abnormal: “then there’s other people who have been teaching in normal schools but they find it a really big jump but they do in the end settle in just fine, and are just normal” (student). No one is locked in or out, but the borders are not often crossed. The staff is seldom off-duty in reality; there is a problem of: “getting time on your own.” Students visit them at will: “you just go if you need to go, you don’t go there for a reason—sometimes you just randomly turn up and say ‘hi’ and have a cup of hot chocolate or something” (student) and “you know them as well as you know another child” (student).

The Meeting scrutinizes breaches of the culture, and legislates for and against transgressors. All adults and children are equally entitled to participate in discussion, criticism, and voting. On the most recent occasions that we attended the Meeting, around two-thirds of the students were present. At

that time, 174 laws had been voted in, including individual and minute prescription of behavior: "BAN. Victor not allowed rubber band gun until he appeals," and "Law 48: Len can have a lighter that doesn't light but sparkles." The Meeting has the power to make law, and indeed to abolish any or all laws. As we watched in March 2005, an eleven-year-old sought permission to light fires in the woods. Law 79 says she is too young as: "Only Shack and over are allowed matches and lighters." Her claim was that "I'm good with fires; it's a nuisance to find someone who's older." The meeting decided that she was responsible enough, but had to undertake that she would not light fires for others of her age or younger and/or leave them in charge. Even those considered less responsible voted in her favor. The elected laws cover everything from bedtimes, bath times, and bikes to more arcane matters (this next one seemingly straight from Harry Potter): "Law 37: You can't swap, sell or buy Magic Cards without someone from the Swindling Committee."

Each law is the product of debate and voting, and can be unmade at any time. This is self-regulation with a vengeance. Each alleged transgression is considered in its own right. In June 2005, Keith was brought up at the Meeting for urinating out of a tree and splashing an older girl who was passing by. Some laughed, one said: "that's evil." The Chair interjected "It's one thing pissing people off, another pissing on them." Much hilarity. But Keith was told not to do it again. In each case, and in the Summerhillian's accumulation of cases over time, there are questions of right and wrong, serious or less serious, appropriate or not. In ways such as these, the school—though it is a community more than a school in the conventional sense—invites and receives an all-embracing allegiance from its membership which is unheard of in state schooling. It manufactures Summerhillians whose loyalties may transcend those of country and home: ". . . my life is more kind of here and not at home. . . . I would call this [Summerhill] home instead of back in [county]" (student), and a teacher commented: ". . . he finds it an alien nation really for him [when going home to Southeast Asia] and he finds himself being very lonely . . . it's missing that wholesome relation that you bond with many individuals on a deeper level, I think."

When "being yourself" and "having your life" proves problematic, the Meeting not only makes laws but is there to advise and adjudicate. Disputes or complaints may be dealt with informally, or by Ombudsmen, who are older students of either gender appointed to be a first point of assistance. Unresolved or serious complaints may lead an individual to "bring up" whoever has offended them at the Meeting. Any child or adult, in any combination, may do so. An eleven-year-old girl explains:

The point about the meeting is to make sure, when the person punched whoever, to make *me* feel [our stress] that it was totally wrong, this is a strong warning. But if you do it again, we will fine you. If you make contact [violence] you won't get a strong warning, they will probably fine you some odd random things like 'Bully's List,' no television, no screens, no social games.

She offered a judicious view of its effectiveness:

Bully's List is one of the fines *we* use [our stress—see later] if someone has made physical contact or bullied someone like mad, like really harassed them, bullying someone by harassing them, and that tends to work for some people and not for others because you get a troublemaker in every school and we've had a few troublemakers and Bully's List has worked and hasn't worked, like every fine might work, might not work.

As an adult explained elsewhere:

The Bully's List, that's a really harsh fine. So that could just be given because he's been a pain in the arse [discussing a particular case] and won't listen to the Meeting so you could give Bully's List. But a big fine doesn't mean that you are a bully, it's just the harsh fine.

There were no students on Bully's List at the time of the most recent fieldwork.

But the real force of the sanctions is social rather than financial. The Meeting teaches the antisocial that they:

. . . can't get away with this stuff because everyone thinks I'm a right twit now and I have to calm down and build relationships . . . the more they go to the Meeting [and are "brought up"] the more fed up and vocal the Meeting gets . . . so it [the problem] does turn itself around.

There is a clear element of persuasion, and also of public shaming in these arrangements, but no signs of scapegoating. It is held, even, that those "brought up" seldom resent their accusers, although we did come across a student who felt that was not the case for her. Basically, the Meeting disciplines by instilling a sense of right and wrong in students by a practical, case-based approach. Through repetition, the more general, moral development of a sense of fairness and responsibility emerges. The internalization can be vivid:

. . . but it's not laws like you can't run in the corridors and you have to pick flowers at this time, it's nothing like that, so you really have to use your head and think "Oh, can I do this?" like if you were about to carve your name in a wall, you'd think, "Oh, do I think that I can do this, no, I probably can't."

Manufacturing Moral Selves

It seems to us significant that Summerhillians shift between "I," "you," "we," and "them" in the way that they do. The speaker above hypothetically incriminates herself as an "I," envisaging herself considering an infringement.

The tendency to regard self as I, we, you, them, interchangeably was also observed in the case of Gary, a boy who reported other boys to the Meeting, who owed him money. Everyone was unsympathetic as lending money was against the laws. Gary ended up voting against himself in agreeing he wouldn't lend money to them or anyone else again. While this may well have been the outcome he had hoped for (saving him future embarrassment in saying "no"), the situation was nevertheless dealt with both dispassionately and impersonally. In a similar act of self-distancing, Summerhillians sometimes also referred to the "I" as a first name: "I wasn't the real Vicki when I was in state school, you're not yourself." Transgressors were seldom identified simply as an impersonal "he," "she," or "them." The thinking was deliberative rather than recriminatory, as Bettelheim earlier noted of the school (in Lawson 1972).¹³ It's as if the students form their identity in the same way as the school forms its community—taking the outside-in, and putting the inside-out in cool appraisal. They had to think for themselves, in ways reminiscent of Deweyan philosophy: "The phrase 'think for one's self' is a pleonasm. Unless one does it for one's self, it isn't thinking" (Dewey 1966, 303). This kind of consideration was extended to their treatment of their interlocutors. It is not often that a schoolchild says to a researcher: "Have you had a good experience so far?"

We have been trying to show how structured and structuring Summerhill is. We invoked the panopticon, although a paradoxically plural one available in large measure to all the participants. We used the language of mechanism, laboratory, and total institution. The strength of boundaries makes the Summerhill "community" almost the opposite of the conventional school-as-community, as in the latter case it is the weakness of school-community boundaries that defines the ideal (Carspecken 1991). Still, we can easily add the notion of a mutual surveillance far more encompassing than in a "normal" school. After all, where would any counter-culture reside? When the hidden curriculum so dominates the curriculum, and when frequent (three or four times per week, currently) all-school Meetings survey relations and behaviors, what is there that is not open—open perhaps in the punitive sense of being exposed to an inevitable scrutiny? We are back to the community without secrets. Far from the "free" image with which we started this account, Summerhill school has invisible boundaries, powerful inspections, binding agreements, and redemptive public rituals, as well as a set of visible sanctions that prompt and reinforce acceptable ways to live together. These all act as an "outside-in" pressure that frames and disciplines interactions while developing identities and relationships, yet always with the possibility of change or resistance. We have suggested something of the total nature of students' engagement with these structures. Summerhill is a powerful mechanism, generating discipline from within, and without the coercive relations of a "normal" school. The school orchestrates a vortex of engagements, from which there is no "backing away," as one student put it. Everyone is "in touch" with everyone else, more or less.¹⁴

Summerhill Inside-Out

Weak Boundaries Make Strong Selves

At the same time, the “school” has weak boundaries where conventional “schools” have strong ones. There are weak boundaries between different student age groups: “In Summerhill a five-year-old could be best friends with a sixteen-year-old and that would not be a problem” (student). Similarly, boundaries between staff and students are minimal in comparison with a conventional school. Students visit staff in their caravans, as we’ve seen: “it’s just like visiting a friend in their room.” They do so informally and indeed can be shooed away in like manner. The first thing the principal looks for in recruiting new staff is “nice people”; a central focus is on relationships. Within the school, there are also many weak distinctions between public and private spaces:

Teacher: they [the youngest students] don’t feel they have to stay out of the staffroom or keep out of your room.

Interviewer: So they would come to your room?

Teacher: Yes, they do, but I don’t always let them in, as I’ve usually had enough of them. I tell them I need time on my own and they’re quite good about that because in a similar way they wouldn’t want me to hang about their rooms all the time.

Another weak boundary is spatial. The classrooms are inside but the outside woodland is accepted as an equally important learning area—how to play, make things. Students come and go as they will, unlike movements “downtown.” Inside or outside, whatever the season, male and female students often dress in similar clothes, big jumpers and loose trousers (a phenomenon noted by other observers more than forty years ago). The strong boundaries are for outsiders like us, who can’t climb the trees, can’t go to the bedrooms which are upstairs in the House. We need a vote of the Meeting even to attend. There is also a reciprocity theme here. Weak boundaries are places of negotiation rather than prohibition or permission and so Summerhillians are good at reading each other, as well as being experts on “themselves”: “Each teacher is different, a different person takes a different amount of time to settle in, the same as students” (student), and “. . . for everyone it’s different, and as long as everyone is respectful and isn’t interfering with someone else’s space and how they feel about that, there’s no problem” (student). This ability to read others and themselves, as we will see, is integral to the practices and interpretations of touch at the school.

This contrast between strong invisible boundaries round the school, and weak boundaries within aspects of its social activity means that students themselves can be relatively unaware of the former, and see themselves as completely unfettered, as when a child comments: “. . . you can treat the staff like you would treat anyone else, like a brother or a sister, and there’s no

laws in this school and no backing away" (student). This view is added to by the principal:

But when ex-students come back they sense that they didn't know how complicated a job it is to be an adult here. They didn't know about the responsibilities and roles we have and I think that's brilliant. I think it's brilliant that they don't know because it shows that what we're doing is right because they're really unaware of the stuff that we have to worry about and think about. So I think: "Well that's a good sign," because it means we're doing it well, and I think that's important for the kids, that they can get on with their life.

Or when three young girls concur: "Well, we learn just from being there, there isn't much to learn because you just come here to be yourself, so you don't need to learn very much at all." The tacit nature of such learning also came up when we discussed how children gained confidence after what some reported to be "scary" experiences in state schools. It was clear that the gaining of confidence, courage, and overcoming shyness were very much on the *bidden* curriculum. Thinking over and articulating these themes, a student responded that this was: ". . . the first time I've actually thought about confidence and courage and not being shy."

How do the participants make overall sense of this interlaced world of weak and strong boundaries? The students' metaphors of relationships center on notions of "home," "family," "brother," and "sister." Teachers were most often portrayed as: "friends really," "like visiting a friend." The adults noted the "enormous attachment" students had to the place: "it's astonishing really." Teachers were more likely to refer to the community of Summerhill as a "tribe," or a "community based on the rights of the child with some constraints about ownership and about property and things like that." A distinction was made between "a community based on friendship, rather than a family based on friendship" (teacher). Both staff and students pointed to a central value of "trusting people," with students more often claiming that relationships are equal: "we're all like equal." While some of the adults avoided "family" images, they also noted that relationships are pretty equal, but not entirely: "I'm not sure it would be such a good thing if they knew as much about me as I know about them" (teacher), and "so in spite of anything that leads towards equality, there is definitely a distinction between an adult and a child, and I think any of the adults here would have to acknowledge that" (teacher).

Relational Learning

Those qualities of trust, equal rights, responsibilities, commitment, honesty, and confidence in pro-Summerhill accounts can take on a "Swallows and Amazons" romantic flavor, and we would prefer to stress that these are not so much the *qualities* of the community as the *work* of the school in the construction, and reconstruction, of selves. For example, a teacher stressed

that “. . . the kids are confident with adults, they're not coy. It's [teaching at Summerhill] not for someone who's a prima donna. I don't care if a kid says 'fuck off'; I don't care what the kids say to me actually, I think the honesty of it all is very good.” In the same way, the process of mediation involving the Ombudsmen shows the emotional work of the school:

Basically I had this friend who always, always wanted to hang out with me and if I hung out with anyone else she got really jealous and it really annoyed me because I just wanted to live my life, and not have her telling me what to do all the time. So I got the Ombudsman and he said just tell her, get angry at her, let her know you are angry and he said if it got too bad he could bring it up for me [i.e. at the Meeting] and propose she couldn't talk to me for the rest of the term or something, because it was only about a week to the end of term. But I kept getting the Ombudsman and eventually she just got the picture and then we made friends again but we weren't really close friends like we were before, we could just say “hi” and play together or something. (student)

Something of that same tone resonates both with the teacher's “don't care” response to abusive language and with the student's realistic evaluation of the effectiveness of fines and the “Bully's List.” There is a *dispassion* within Summerhill,¹⁵ as well as a passion for it. As a teacher put it to us: “there's none of the anger that underpins it [swearing, etc.] at other schools,” and at that point we began to make sense of another teacher's enthusiasm for Summerhill. Having said familiar things about seeing “the emotional difference between living in a place like this and living back out in a kind of atomized family structure,” he went on to point to the “sense of community and connectedness.” But, at the time of the interview, he puzzled us: “the kids are completely neutral about what they are doing.” We now interpret this in terms of that dispassion we noted above. That is, it isn't personal; there is a system that delivers consequences for actions. Your friend may “bring you up” but it is the Meeting that delivers a judgment. The Meeting is not them, it is us. It's connected to the phenomenon of the floating pronouns that we noted earlier—the grammar of empathy, as it were.¹⁶ We began to see that theme as a thread through the numerous conversations we had had with students and teachers. The Meeting was clearly central to the “neutral” functioning of the school as a learning experience for the students, as well as a demonstration of equality in relation to adult as opposed to child power. As one teacher commented: “. . . it's good for the kids to see you can 'bring up' adults,” while another commented on the confidence that even little kids showed in the Meeting:

It's amazing sometimes how the little kids speak in the Meetings and the respect they get from everyone. Everybody is really quiet to be able to understand them so they really get heard and I think for the little kids that must be amazing to see these much bigger

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people all listening to what I'm saying, it must be an amazing confident feeling.

One of the oldest girls commented that Summerhill was: "a different way of life and a different way of education." We were struck by that coincidence of "way of life" and "education" in the social mechanisms of the school. The notion of "living your own life" was a dominant aspect of the culture. The older girls told of the arrival of a young Japanese girl, when they too were young:

. . . we actually taught her English. She didn't go to any lessons till a later stage . . . you bond better because you know who they are, so even though she couldn't speak any English we still managed to get on with her completely fine, and still play like little girls do, because we were young then. [later adding] I always thought in some way you learn more life skills than you would anywhere else because of sharing and learning to get on with each other, being patient kind of thing.

This pattern of social learning within little groups, often of different ages, was very apparent in the data:

I always tend to have friends who are older than me because when I mix with kids my own age I don't learn anything, whereas if I mix with kids younger, I teach, er, give skills to the younger kids and the older kids give skills to me. So it's a win-win situation. (female student)

The avoidance of the word "teach" may be significant. It's a little too directive for the culture. In fact, to understand education at Summerhill you have to be ungrammatical: the students *learn each other*, in more than one sense. And the teachers are only part of that.

Taking Risks

Summerhill also appeared to staff and students as a place of necessary risk. The grounds were open to the students, tree-climbing was permitted, and—to pick out the feature that would probably most alarm the risk culturalists—older children were allowed to carry machetes, defined by Summerhill Law as blades over six inches (Law 94): "Law 85: You have to be Shack or over and can only have a machete in the woods and are not allowed to carry it around—have to keep it in your room," and see also "Law 80: No sheath knives downtown (UK law)." Note the strength of the boundary implicit in Law 80. The outside is the United Kingdom, and by implication Summerhill is somewhere else—another country, no less. Most concerns about safety were not about sexual threats of any kind; they concerned injuries caused by play, mainly skateboarding. Students were adamant about the value of risks such as swinging from the Big Beech tree: ". . . if you didn't

do that sort of thing you'd never have the chance to grow up" and "whatever you do there's a chance you'll hurt yourself and if you can't have chances like that, you can't live." Teachers agreed, and the principal identified both the necessity of risk to learning, and the dangers it posed for the school as the risk culture expands:

I see that this whole safety issue and the insurance and the accountability and the whole thing that goes on out there is going to seep into us. . . . I don't see how they [students] can have access to these huge high trees just whenever they want . . . and that we can get away with it. I don't know how it will come about, whether somebody will actually get injured and there'd be a huge litigation thing, or whether our insurance company will eventually say we're not going to insure you anymore unless you make these restrictions. I don't know, but I can see it coming and I think that's very frightening because the whole issue of risk-taking is so vital to Summerhill—because that is what Summerhill is all about.

These same principles also extended to touching children:

. . . so the whole child protection issue comes under the same bracket really, we have to keep going because we believe that what we do is fine and we believe it's good to be able to cuddle children and we believe that physical contact between kids and adults is absolutely fine and should be happening and if we believe that then we have to keep doing it, because it's OK.

In effect, the school both resisted and compromised in terms of audit culture restrictions:

House Parent: Well there's things I used to do five years ago that I wouldn't be able to do now like drive kids down to the beach in my car, perhaps there'd be four in the back seat and it's a mile run—then a trip on my boat, potentially quite hazardous.

Interviewer: Now you wouldn't?

House Parent: I think it would be tricky with insurance and stuff. . . . I think Summerhill like everywhere has been forced to change . . . society and people worry about these things a lot more than they did five years ago.

Finally, it is important to link these experiences to perceptions of the outside. Many Summerhillians are familiar with conventional schools. Indeed, for quite a few, it is their failure at these schools that has taken them there. A dominant theme is that adults in such institutions distance themselves from the students: ". . . all the teachers there [state school] stayed very distant . . . and didn't give hugs" (Kent); "the teachers used to stay in staffrooms and kids stayed out of staffrooms in my school" (northeast England); and ". . . I didn't

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get on with the adults; they always seemed to push you away." The teachers on the "outside" were clearly "out of touch."

An End to Pretending

A further dominant theme concerned their sense of themselves referred to previously, and the emotional ethos of the school they had attended, including issues of bullying and harassment:

. . . when I came here it was such a relief. I felt like there was this weight off my back. I didn't have to go to the state school [any more]. I didn't have to be bullied for the rest of my life and I didn't have to pretend to be something I'm not.

Summerhill, perhaps above all else, was somewhere where you didn't have to pretend. Students don't have to "act cool in a certain way to get people to like you." Elsewhere this was not the case: "I really started to lose myself because that was the worst school I've ever been to" (Scotland); "I couldn't be myself because I had to wear a uniform everyday and I wouldn't answer questions in class but here I don't have to worry what other people think" and ". . . we don't have huge, huge arguments about 'oh I hate it when you do this, stop it, stop it,' and get really angry with each other. We don't do that" because ". . . you can just totally be yourself and don't have to act or try to get people to like you because if you're yourself and they harass you or make fun of you, you can bring them up in the Meeting." They also noted the absence of sexual harassment and name-calling at Summerhill, contrasting that with their earlier experiences: "If someone of the same sex gives each other a hug there, they'd get harassed loads and thought to be gay or lesbian"; and ". . . people would harass them saying they were gay or something," also ". . . if you're a little bit different then you'll be classed as a freak and they won't go near you. But here, it's OK, they don't care." Again, that same, *neutral* don't care. Yet in Summerhill:

. . . you get freedom, you're allowed to speak in the Meetings. You can deal with people bullying you. If someone comes up to you and says you're a squashed nose person, I could take it to the Meeting and they would do something about it pretty quick.

Summerhill: Touching On Inside-Out and Outside-In

As stated, we quickly discovered that our intention to focus on touch made no sense without locating it within the culture of relationships that constitutes Summerhill's production of selves. Recall the inspector's injunction "no touching!" In terms of our research focus, we had to retreat from touch in order to locate it in a more contextual way. *Relational touch* contained physical touch, in ways foreign to outside institutions where concerns about accountability and risk determine touching practices in more rigid ways. In

Summerhill, touch (and its embodying relationships) was constituted by both the outside-in and the inside-out features of the culture.¹⁷ It was a question of the nature of the flows between these two surfaces. We prefer to call Summerhill a culture rather than an organization because it effected itself in more tribe-like ways: it *governed* itself, and in doing so produced a distinctive citizenship, one that we find difficult to name happily as pupils or students or kids, given the range in ages (four through sixteen), and stages of development. That active citizenship in turn was the generator of identity. It was dynamic and self-formative, in that participants *chose* what to take an interest in, and in choosing learned something of their own desires, responsibilities, and identity. As a teacher from North America explained it to us: “. . . if you’re a child you expect some guidance, but the basic raw thing is: do you or do you not have the right to choose what you do from morning to evening, to stand or fall on the choices. And here you do.”

The outside-in boundaries of Summerhill—panopticon, total institution, self-regulation, and surveillance—all made Summerhill a strong as well as a benign society. It is also a highly intuitive and tacit one. The principal spoke of Summerhill’s community as a:

. . . family or a tribe, I think it’s like a tribe, but it’s more than that, it’s just a life area. It’s an area where everything happens and it’s definitely not a school . . .

Interviewer: Are you a tribal leader then?

Principal: No I’m not a leader. No, because I’m not really a leader anyway, I’m just here, I kind of monitor things and keep an eye on things—people sometimes sort of want me to be—I don’t really think of myself as a leader, I’m just a bit bossy that’s all.

Interviewer: So who are the elders then?

Principal: Oh, I’m an elder, I think me and Mike are the elders, and I think Tony to a degree.

But at the same time, these strong and bounded relations were interlinked with, and helped generate, weak boundaries between age cohorts, learning spaces, and across teacher-child relationships. The strong boundaries ensured things like social and personal identity, safe spaces, effective government, and social redress. At the same time, they enabled weak boundaries that provoked relationships based on self-knowledge and negotiated spaces that were potentially learning-rich in all sorts of social ways. People learned to read each other, and hence themselves in a kind of social dialectic: in such interaction, varying degrees of relational touch were negotiated. And the panopticon features were available, more or less, to all.¹⁸ Of course, the opposition of strong and weak is inadequate in itself, because the freedoms of Summerhill could also be breached in the strong sense—that’s what all the laws and Meetings were for. Such breaches, however, were part of how the school worked as an organism; they were how people learned, in important ways. The Meeting was a

place of conflict just as much as it was of consensus. The Meeting has been portrayed in utopian terms, but it would be more useful perhaps to see it as a working dystopia, as part of the “organic moving space” (principal) of the community. It is maybe not too much of a paradox to say that one way the school worked was by breaking down and mending itself, rendering problematic social relations *explicit* as a moral, emotional, and rational curriculum for communal and personal living as well as learning. Issues central to relational touch, then, were an inherent part of these disputes. It was clear, as well, that the Meeting had a more mundane function: you went there to keep in touch with whatever was going on.

The Learning Swarm

In addition, these processes were fed by a series of informal learning sets, based on a myriad of relationships—teacher-student, student-peers, mixed-age groupings, and so on. This was Summerhill as a learning-swarm. It was this aspect of the school that the government inspectors most consistently neglected. In the last full inspection of the school (1999) by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate/Office for Standards in Education (HMI/OfSTED) only one data-recording sheet (out of fifty-four lodged by the inspectors) addressed learning outside the classroom. Inspectors regarded what happened outside the classroom basically as a kind of truancy, hence their obsession with the question: “how often do you attend lessons?” In most organizations or institutions, strong links mean constraint and coercion, but in Summerhill the strongly bounded features—like the Meeting, or the social circumferences of the school, the school as community—seemed to create spaces for people to feel that they could be themselves, live their own lives, recover themselves from damaging earlier experiences, live without harassment, or successfully seek redress for whatever injuries befell them in the school itself. In that latter sense, the outside was also at the core of Summerhill, as a set of learning and living experiences that students had to work on—hence the many comparisons of state school with conditions in Summerhill by students. Hence too, in a weaker sense, the same core/periphery relation existed for the teachers at the school. Summerhill dealt with the real world outside as well as inside, constantly turning the inside out and the outside in. Nor did Summerhillians fear their future outside.¹⁹

Interviewer: You could say you live in this happy little bubble when you’re young and growing up and stuff, and then suddenly you are in the big, bad, cruel, jealous, possessive, ambitious world.

Student: It’s good if it teaches you how to make friends when you get into the big jealous bad world.

Our conclusion was that the school enabled its students to be Summerhillians, and to call that themselves, a label that included all ages (staff too) and all

students, past and present. Each sought, in an oft-recurring sentiment, to get on with their lives. An experienced teacher at the school, familiar with free schools internationally, commented that there is “an accepted individuality and agency that I have not experienced happening anywhere else, a very, very definite personal narrative.” We see this vividly in the data: “if you don’t act like yourself, you can’t get true friends” and “you’re just yourself.” That was both the autonomy and conformity of the school. In such an emotional and relational circulation, policed in such a “neutral” way, physical touch was neither here nor there. You do it if you feel like it, and if not you don’t. Another stereotype bites the dust—Summerhill was some way from being the touchy-feely school it is sometimes portrayed to be.

Relational and Physical Touch

As we’ve seen, the outside experiences of school were typically reported in terms of distance, of being pushed away by adults. The inside perceptions were of a place where you could not back away, where you were always in touch with others. The pushing/backing/distancing/closing metaphors suggested the notion of relational touch, provided we define that touch as also a calculation of distance. Children at Summerhill were in relational touch with each other and with themselves. That particular touch was an odd mixture of *passion* (about the place) and *dispassion* about others, in a governmental sense. Inspection agencies had no brief for relational touch, but as we’ve seen they were intent on proscribing physical touching. In a previous inspection, Tim (teacher) attended a Meeting with inspectors present, and reported to us:

. . . so I’m sitting there and Karen comes up and says, “can you massage my shoulders?” I know the inspector is behind me, I know it’s an issue, but I thought, “Well, I’m not going to change my behavior because an inspector is behind me,” so I massaged her shoulders and then at the end of the two-day inspection, I’m part of the curriculum advisory team, so I was asked to go in with the inspectors and listen to feedback and then they said, “You can leave now because we’ve got something to talk to [the principal] about,” and they basically said that a member of staff had been inappropriately touching a young female student and they were going to report it to Social Services.

Tim had known the student for around four years. Shoulder massage was a familiar activity between them and within the community more generally, as we observed ourselves and were also told: “it’s not unusual to see one man giving another a massage at the Meeting.” Those who were deemed good at it amongst the children sometimes had queues waiting for attention. The practice of massage is part of the school culture: some do it; some don’t, and it varied according to national cultures, backgrounds, and dispositions of both staff and students. As one member of the staff put it, there were a number of children from the United Kingdom, Korea, and Japan—all of whom had cultures that were more inclined to avoid touch. There was a similar variety in relation to

other forms of touch, such as hugging, play-fighting, and so on. Anything that got out of hand—as sometimes play-fighting might—could be resolved at the Meeting, if not more informally. Generally, staff and students felt that it was not an issue and were incredulous at practices outside. Typical comments included: “never crosses my mind,” “not a real problem for us,” “it’s natural,” “part of the ethos,” “it’s really a matter of trust.” Another teacher discussing the no touch practices elsewhere commented: “I know you’re crying and you’ve hurt yourself physically but it’s really against the law for me to give you a hug and comfort, so here take that rescue remedy and hope you’ll be all right later, it’s just ridiculous.” The principal also noted: “. . . they [the child protection officers] go on about how abusers can look normal—and how they’re lurking around every corner. I mean, honestly, it’s completely ridiculous.”

As part of a more general aspect of Summerhill governance, issues of touch were not decided by universal prescriptions, any more than were relationships and lesson participation. Each case of touching or not touching was decided on its own merits: “Kim, Lee, they were the first Taiwanese, she was just like a pet, one of those people who would cling on to any part of anybody. Vick, John, yes, Toni not, she’d knock you out” (teacher), and a student remarked: “I’m just like that, I don’t touch my family much and I don’t really touch anyone much here.” There were also examples given of touch as a kinesthetic approach to writing and other skills, and also of the need to wean any clingy kids into a better understanding of other people’s space, without making a fuss about it. But both of these were considered inappropriate in our other case study schools where, in contrast, needy was rescripted as too risky, and touch defensiveness implied emotional damage. There were predictable age and gender differences as well, but which add little to our purposes here.

Inspection and Summerhill

We could cut short this account of touch by saying that Summerhill generally regarded it as a fuss about nothing. Where new children seemed particularly needy, the principal would alert staff. In accordance with government requirements, paper policies had to be produced and guidelines were issued to members of staff. These were regarded as a bureaucratic imposition and irrelevant to the social processes of the community. But there was a further cost to the school in the state’s obsession with sexual and other forms of abuse. These external forces which had completely changed the behavior of those in our other case studies still had *some* effect on the strong boundaries of the school that the principal and others had noted. The first of these was the relatively explicit imposition of policies and audit requirements, and the extension of regulations to cover risk, or its audit twin, safety.

The second was more insidious, and suggests a danger that the strong boundaries of the school could be undermined by a more existential uncertainty. Reflecting on his encounters with the inspectorates (educational and social), Tim (see above) pointed to a number of successive states of mind.

First, he could be spontaneous, and offer a massage to whoever, or give a piggy-back to small children. He had done that for over eight years. But as soon as the inspectors drew attention to such behavior, he had to make a conscious decision to maintain his behavior or desist—live the “lie that you can do it as long as they’re not there.” Then there followed a sort of backwash effect from that process “that lie then makes you conscious of you doing it when they’re not there in some ways.” The intrusion was experienced as a kind of pollution that made spontaneity less possible. We might add that the inspectors’ concerns that staff know “where the *boundaries* are” suggested a beyond to these boundaries that constituted abuse. Thus abuse, never on the agenda before, was then never entirely absent from professional calculations. The inspectors’ boundaries thus invaded the school’s very different boundaries with a possibility of what Tim called the corrupt, and this takes us back to our initial concerns that our own endeavors to research and interrogate touch were similarly corrupting.

Conclusion

First we offer an interpretation of how Summerhill works. We then turn to the specific issues of physical and relational touch in order to think about their significance for the nature of an education for individuality. Then we locate these within the setting of the school. After which we consider how the “problem” of touch originates and is promoted in a perverse sexual circulation. We then locate the issues more broadly in contrast to the regimes of accountability/effectiveness/standards, etc., that currently police schooling. Finally, we touch on the political significance of such an enduring example of “free” schooling and its relation to possible educational futures.

We started with the notion of Summerhill as a free school, locally known as the “do-as-you-please” school.²⁰ The “do-as-you-please” tag is current. It is long-standing (Skidelsky 1969, 33). In its inaccuracy, it was useful for justifying the criticism of Summerhill as “narcissistic” and inevitably “individualist” (Tam 1998, 57). We found Summerhill to be structured in ways that were almost always neglected by inspectors, media accounts, and academic comment (Chamberlin 1989).²¹ It had strong boundaries and many laws, as we were reminded by a “dinner lady’s” reference to a rule-free school as: “completely wrong really because there’s more rules here than anywhere I’ve ever been.” It will be recalled that there were 174 laws extant at the time of our fieldwork. We used the analytical language of Foucault (1977), with a dash of Bernstein (1971) and Goffman (1990 [1963]), to express these strengths. This was the language of the panopticon, self-regulation, discipline, boundary, confession, orthodoxy, and consensus as an outcome—the moral factory of Summerhill, and the processes through which it manufactured selves.

But the structures enable rather than disable in the ways that might be anticipated by Foucault. So this is a benign panopticon (see footnote 15), within which various forms of learning are promoted as a result of the weak boundaries between staff/students, and also age cohorts in the community. We could

look at social learning here—and latch on to Lave and Wenger (1990), Vygotsky on scaffolding (1978), connecting these to the informal learning sets that we found in the community. But these narrower theories of *learning* seem to us to be of less interest than theories of *becoming* in the Summerhill context. We need to understand how the plural and paradoxical panopticon works for the good, or at least for certain kinds of good, and how that connects with the notion of relational touch. Our feeling is that the efficacy is not psychological so much as it is anthropological, much as Neill later argued.²² That's why we have ended up happier with the notion of the Summerhillian rather than the pupil, kid, young person, or student (although we use this latter term throughout to distinguish students from their teachers). So our theories of social organizations are helpful only if we invert them in this case, and see how becoming develops in the being of the Summerhill machine. Whence our recourse to a rather different language of explanation, involving the generative oxymorons of "working dystopia" and "benign panopticon."

1. As we saw earlier, the notion of touch as an issue of safety or protection was widely regarded as absurd at Summerhill. Instead we developed the concept of relational touch, wherein Summerhillians learned to relate to themselves, to others, and to intuit boundaries. All of these things were an education of the emotions. The invocation of this kind of citizenship is precisely what A. S. Neill had in mind. "I started a school in which the emotions would be primary" (Neill 1971, 118), and:

... by neglecting emotional development we turn out children whose emotions are so primitive that they can only attach them to the triteness supplied in mass production by our newspaper magnates. The teachers . . . should see that they are neglecting what should be their chief work—the development of the whole personality, head and heart. (Neill 1939, 138–9)

As we saw from the floating pronouns in their talk about the rights and wrongs of cases, Summerhillians were culturally adept both at putting themselves in other minds and, more importantly, putting other minds in themselves. We were reminded of the distinction between a liberal expression of difference ("they are just like us") with a more radical insight ("we are just like them"), expressed by Nadine Gordimer in one of her early novels (1958). The same distinction turns up in contemporary theorizing about the projective imagination (Tanesini 2001, 18), and the possibilities of a notion of "we" that does not depend so remorselessly on an exclusive notion of "them." Much of the current debate on voice and empowerment in schools might do well to re-examine its insubstantial nature in contrast with the practices of Summerhill (Osler and Starkey 2005). We have in mind particularly the prescriptive and unequal nature of participation: "children need to be taught the requisite skills and strategies for becoming independent" (Holden and Clough 1998, 37). Noddings finds A. S. Neill "too permissive" but agrees that "happiness" ought to be an aim of education (Noddings 2003, 2, 4). But it is

surely necessary to let a student have the last word in relation to such matters. Here, a thirteen-year-old student looks back at the inspectors, and wonders what went wrong:

I don't know how they did it, how they managed to miss the point so badly. Maybe unconsciously they want Summerhill to fail because they missed the chance to come here themselves, Maybe they should come and finish their childhood so they can leave everyone else to get on with theirs. (Stronach as quoted in Vaughan 2006, 122)

2. We also noted how democratic mechanisms within the school offered a visibility of practices that was far more effective than any conceivable transparency of procedures. The panopticon makes everyone visible to each other, whereas accountability offers only the bureaucratic deception of a world made transparent by “indicators” (Strathern 2000). The Meeting filled the gap between what Law and Mol (2002) call managerialist control (as it were, the very limits of audit) and the still excessive flow of complex, embodied interactions that characterize any organization. The prospective or retrospective rhetorics of audit were merely “staging accountability” (Law and Mol 2002, 100, 101)—as prevention or blame—while the agonistic realities of resolving real conflicts and injustices enacted responsibility *in the moment and for the moment*. Responsibility was what you had to exercise, not what you had to learn. Of course, this practical/procedural dichotomy was breached continuously in Summerhill by the creation of new laws and adjudications in respect to members. But these latter regulations were part of the practical flux, open to adaptation, extension or repeal. They were not a fixed, abstract, and universal template for measuring compliance so much as a situated and shifting search for resolution that regarded its short-term failures as ultimately productive: they approximated self-government, not governmentality. In relation to Law and Mol's argument, the audit solution, advocated by the inspectors, amounts to a form of utopian absolutism (regulations will prescribe and proscribe actions in order to achieve best practice), while Summerhill took a more pragmatic and *ad hoc* approach. In this way, conventional attributions of the utopian and the pragmatic change place.

More generally, such an approach offers a corrective to the risk society which many claim is responsible for polluting touching and other behaviors (Beck 1987 and 1992). Risk has been described as: “a container for a bundle of issues that are not readily disentangled” (Mythen 2004), and which focus on the eternal theme of damage and disgrace (Douglas 1985). As a result, schools are enjoined by the state to become sites of generalized risk where managing risk mismanages opportunities to learn. The risks are managed not by managing and distributing the “goods,” but by managing and distributing the “bads”; performance is very much focused on danger. No one gets to climb the Big Tree. To invert Law and Mol's taxonomy of utopianism (2002), this is dystopian absolutism.²³ However, such accounts offer only a partial reading of expert-lay relations and “fail to recognise that the ‘done to’ lay

public are at one and the same time 'doers' working within the relations of definition" (Mythen 2004). In other words, both professionals and lay public share an experience of helping to create particular labels and definitions which in turn provide sets of relationships that derive from them. In a situation where the non-risky population now view themselves (and are viewed by others) as equally hazardous as the risky population, an element of self-fulfilling prophecy begins to circulate. Those whose aim is to protect themselves "appear to create risk categories and hierarchies of risk themselves, that is, to make up risk cultures" (Adkins 2001). Such circumstances are illustrated in our account of Tim's guilt-stages in massaging a girl's shoulders in front of the inspector, and of our own initial uneasiness about our pervy questioning. Policing leaves actions and presences behind, and looks forward *in panic* to the possible interpretations of possible future actions. The presumption of innocence preceding any precaution becomes irresponsible. This is the absurd end-logic of audit, a sclerotic dystopia of educational practices, a Kafkan dénouement.

Such overscripted professional protocols inevitably lead to a kind of defensive professional reaction, whereby central aspects of professionalism (e.g., relationships, values such as trust, empathy, responsibility, individuality) are overwritten by defensive prescription and proscription. Dawson's Aristotelian distinction between "outside-in" and "inside-out" professionalism is apposite here. The inspectors enact the outside-in dimension of regulation, anticipating the value of compliance while the school sticks more or less to its inside-out rationale. As our Summerhill experience indicated, touch then is not really the point. It's not so much *touch* that we should be concerned with but *motives, context, and values*. Yet motive, context, and positive values are missing from accountability policy and guidelines.

3. We noted earlier how the media promoted both pornography and an accompanying and completely contradictory hand-wringing morality. Jacko in the Sacko gets a Whacko, to parody the combination. Irigaray notes this tendency: "the exploitation of women's bodies by the pornographic media (1994 [1989], x)." British media adopt this kind of morally split discourse, typically in relation to topics like sexual assault, the "pregnant teenager," or the "great paedophile panic" (Hoggart 2007). In such discourses, "purity and impurity must simultaneously contest each other" (Stronach, Frankham, and Stark 2007, 220). The "problem" of touch originates and is promoted in such a perverse circulation. It is instructive that Summerhill, too, gets caught up in sexual suspicion, as the "School for Scandal," despite the fact that there has been no such scandal in the school's history. Nude bathing is the recurrent charge. Even a perfectly sane recent account in a respectable UK newspaper could not resist it. The account reports that a Scottish Summerhill is being planned by a professor and a former university chief. But the illustration (unacknowledged and thirty years old at least) is a photograph of a line of small children about to jump into the swimming pool. And, yes, there are three bare bums on display. Summerhill's progressive nature, its freedom, is immediately translated into a sexual provocation which in turn is an aid in

the suppression of any and all such ideas of freedom (Nutt 2006). It's not safe to be free, says the subtext.

4. In addition, Summerhill embodies democratic practices that work in relation to the development of student identity and democratic, friendly relations between students of different age, gender, ethnic group, and nationality. That is hugely important in that, elsewhere, these things seldom happen. Bullying, harassment, racism, and alienation are rife in schools. Summerhill outcomes are in accord with the rhetorics of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 22 promotes practices: "indispensable for their dignity and the free development of their personality" (cited in Dews 2002, 36). Such concerns are peripheral to the dominant audit regime, with its insistence on standards, effectiveness, and improvement. But they have something important to say to the policy maker stuck on the narrow instrumentalism and authoritarianism that characterizes contemporary schooling. There is nothing perfect about examples such as Summerhill, nor can we imagine that they transfer unproblematically to other educational contexts. But they ought still to be part of any discussion of "educational potential" between politicians, policy makers, and professionals (Scheffler 1984, 154). We would want to add students.

The current accountability monologues are damagingly anti-educational in this respect, and it is interesting how progressive notions have completely disappeared from public discourse. The situation is not helped by the way that progressive and critical debates in education have tended increasingly—for unavoidable reasons—to be confined to the critical intellectuals (Giroux and McLaren 1984; Giroux 1992). They offer valuable ideas and arguments, but there is a dearth of examples of democratic schooling as actual contemporary practices. Where such examples are offered, it turns out that the democratic ambition is highly limited in relation to former times—the personalization of the prescribed, the assistance of the self-esteem specialist, the involvement of young people in curriculum adaptation (for example, Apple and Beane 1999, 83). Summerhill, on the other hand, remains a pedagogical site of "radical democratic practice" (Dolby 2003, 264, 268) and needs to be recalled and disseminated as a resource for the future. After all, it was once suggested by inspectors that Summerhill constituted a "piece of fascinating educational research" (HMI Report 1949, cited by Goodman in Lawson 1972). Young even "suggested that the progressive schools might become laboratories for educational research and experiment, attached to university departments of education" (Skidelsky 1969, 256). That research future was never realized.

It may seem a strange historical anomaly that we need to turn once more to the legacy of free schooling, but the recurrence is even greater. There is much in Dewey's writing on the school as a "miniature community, an embryonic society" (Dewey 1962 [1902, 1900], 18), as a place for the development of active beings whose interest is in education (Dewey 1966, 125). Indeed, his definition of the notion of democracy itself is a good description of Summerhill in educative practice, "A democracy is more than a form of government, it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey 1966, 87).

5. There is a corollary to those damaging circumstances. The radical separation of educational research from educational experiment left change in the hands of the politicians and the media as the most potent evaluative voice. It left progressive schooling as a backwater, in policy terms. It left educational research bereft of experiments, and so increasingly tied to evaluating the innovations dreamed up by politicians or outlier researchers willing to advance government causes in education. In that sort of way, Summerhill simply disappeared from the mid-1970s until 1999, when OfSTED decided to deliver the *coup de grace* and close down the school. The consequences are too numerous to go into in this article, but two of them should perhaps be noted. First, we found it difficult to interpret Summerhill as an educational entity—it did not fit into the improvement and effectiveness discourses of educational research and evaluation. It did not fit the audit templates of OfSTED. We did not find sociology of education theories that seemed to address its unusual nature. It may be that we do not have good theories of schools because we do not have good schools to theorize about.²⁴

6. Finally, can we disentangle some of the political context? It is salutary to return to the literature of the '60s. Was there ever really a time when a skeptic of progressivism, not an advocate, would write of education in the United Kingdom: "No one would dispute the claim that the progressive ideal has triumphed, or is triumphing, at the primary and junior level" (Skidelsky 1969, 14)? Nor does it seem believable that there was ever a time when a major educational figure in the United States²⁵ would find in the self-government of Summerhill: "the breakdown of our Western code of morality implicit in the spread of Neill's hedonism to the majority of the next generation" (Rafferty, in Lawson 1972, 20). The same critic drew attention to images of "sex perverts" (p. 15), "frolic in the park, a daisy-picking foray, or an experiment in free love" (p. 17), concluding: "What the unkempt and sometimes terrifying generation of tomorrow quite obviously needs are more inhibitions, not fewer" (p. 18). These were the surfaces of some of the moral panics which Summerhill engendered. But there were opposing verdicts from the other side, black radicals in the United States who saw in Summerhill an end to oppressive, state-administered schooling. Rossman saw Neill as a Spock for "the 'post-modern' young just now maturing into parenthood" (in Lawson 1972, 141). Ackerman exclaimed: "Shall a child be governed from the head down or from the heart up?" (in Lawson 1972, 242), while Fromm saw in Summerhill a stark dichotomy between, "love of life" or "biophilia" and the current "necrophilia" (in Lawson 1972, 253). Little wonder, on any side, that Summerhill became a shifting signifier, demonized on the Right and endowed with magical properties for social revolution on the Left.

Certainly, the sorts of progressivism and critical education that Summerhill and its offshoots and developments stood for—or were taken to stand for—were buried by the Thatcherite and Reaganite resettlements of the 1980s and 1990s. In the United States, Giroux claimed that: "at all levels of national and daily life, the breadth and depth of democratic relations are being rolled back"

(Giroux 1992, 12). In the United Kingdom, these trends have culminated in the sorts of authoritarian micro-management of educational acts that “touch” regulations exemplify, as also in the precise specification of teaching performances within a more general regime of national instruction. We suggest that these logics have reached a kind of absurd intensity that in itself engenders a counter-movement. We end by returning to Goodman, who commented on Summerhill and progressive contexts in the early 1970s. He argued that just as Rousseau opposed the artificiality of monarchy, and Dewey the genteel residues that were irrelevant to industry, so too had Neill reacted against twentieth-century authoritarianism. Neill had in mind, of course, not “60s permissiveness” (where he is usually misplaced), but the European moral abyss that was exemplified by the Great War. Then he had in mind the authoritarianism of Fascism, and had the privilege of being refused a visa first by the Soviet Union and then by the United States in its McCarthyite phase. Goodman concluded with a generalization which we offer as an optimistic prompt to further thinking on progressive and critical educational reform: “The form that progressive education takes in each era is prophetic of the next social revolution” (Goodman, in Lawson 1972, 213).

Notes

1. Economic and Social Research Council (UK), grant number RES000220815. “Touchlines: The Problematics of ‘Touching’ between Children and Professionals.” The ideas in this article are further developed in Piper and Stronach (2008). By “liberal” education we invoke a wide range of labels, from the progressive to the critical, but which are characterized by a desire to offer a broad education through democratic and empowering processes.

2. The meetings share some characteristics with Dewey’s account of social control (1963 [1938]) where he advocates that students should participate in group planning. However, for Dewey the teachers are necessarily the most mature and experienced members, while in the Summerhill example it could be the students who have the experience. Both Goodsman (1992) and Lucas and Lamb (2000) note the influence of “Big Kids.”

3. In addition, younger children may also appeal to older children who act as mentors and are called Ombudsmen (of either sex). A series of committees and student-appointed functionaries run aspects of the school—for example, bedtimes are decided by the Meeting, and supervised by “Beddies Officers.” The school is divided into five age-related houses: Cottage, San, House, Shack, and Carriage, in ascending order of age. Spatially, the grounds of the school comprise several acres of woodland, some open grassy areas, a large house, and a number of one-story classroom blocks. Most staff live-in, and are housed in caravans scattered around the grounds.

4. Relational touch connects well with the idea of “relational knowing” described as “knowledge of self and other, and knowledge of critical action” (Gallego, Hollingsworth, and Whiteback 2001, 240), and with the notion of a “relational meeting,” which becomes “what it is because of the entire pattern to which it contributes and which it is absorbed” (Dewey 1934, 295).

5. We are very grateful to all the participants in the Summerhill community. Thanks also for helpful criticism and advice from three anonymous reviewers and Jo Frankham, Dane Goodsman, Maggie MacLure, Cathie Pearce, and John Piper.

6. Although one group did report us to a teacher on the grounds that they were not sure where our questions about relationships were leading.

7. Neill commented on the visibility of sexual matters in the school: “Some years ago, a new boy from a public school tried to introduce sodomy. He was unsuccessful. Incidentally, he was surprised and alarmed when he discovered that the whole school

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knew about his efforts" (Neill 1968 [1962], 207). Skidelsky (1969, 50), a critical commentator, agreed that "Life at Summerhill is very public."

8. This is a media commonplace in the popular press in the United Kingdom. In the same journalist's column, a scantily clad model has the heading "Special DDs." Beneath, and with unremarked irony, the headline reads, "Expose Sex Fiends AND Other Scum" (Holmes 2006).

9. "Bums 'n' tits" refers to UK tabloid obsessions with the naked female figure, ("tits 'n' ass" in a U.S. context).

10. This is the term used to describe people in the local village. School Law 42: "You can't go to local kids' houses unless you have been invited by an adult and they have contacted the school." The school laws are more restrictive outside the school than inside—there is "no swearing" downtown, for example.

11. The school intake is international—the staff is mainly but not exclusively British.

12. The principal had no concrete limit, but visits were usually "about twice a term" on agreed days. Otherwise ". . . it disrupts the whole life of the community to have people coming and going."

13. Bettelheim dismissed Neill's theorizing as "charmingly naïve" but counted him as a great educator: ". . . such a setting demands of the child that he develop a very high degree of self-respect; and with it, true respect for others" (in Lawson 1972, 108–9). Bettelheim feared that the school rested on Neill's charisma and would not survive his demise. Our evidence suggests otherwise.

14. In this article we do not seek to theorize "touch" but have done so in chapter five of *Don't Touch! An Educational Story of a Panic* (Piper and Stronach 2008). Briefly, we have tried to extend both Derrida (2005) and especially Nancy's work in "being singular plural" (2000) in order to develop our own notion of a "free touch" analogous to "free speech." Under such an "experience of freedom" as Nancy puts it, the "licensing" of the audit culture is criticized as a founding authoritarianism.

15. Neill noted something of this in a letter to a friend in the 1960s. He doubted if extreme politics could ever attract Summerhills—they lacked the driving anger of childhood: "Does freedom lead to indifference? Not quite," he concluded (Neill 1983, 130).

16. Can love for the school and a clear passion for its philosophy be reconciled with a certain interpersonal dispassion, and recorded also as a kind of empathy? We can think of no conventional school whose ethos would include those ingredients, but these seem to us to be the odd mixture that characterizes Summerhill. It helps to think of the school as a "tribe" rather than an organization: cultures can reconcile opposites and contradictions in quite productive ways.

17. We argue elsewhere (Piper and Stronach 2008) that this circumstance illustrates the metonymic nature of touch. It has a part-whole relation that defines the act and meaning of touch, for the one touching and the one touched, although of course the signification may differ greatly. Relational touch, then, is plural, displaced, and metonymic in its character.

18. The classic panopticon disciplines by making the mass visible to the master (Foucault 1977). Hence its blueprint for schools, prisons, and factories in the nineteenth century—as the all-seeing eye of power. But in Summerhill, the term can be radically distributed, in that each member has a perspective on the others which they hold to be complete, or almost so; hence the repetition of the "no secrets here" theme. Of course, the adults think they know more than the students, and the students don't know what they don't know, and so on. But it is clear that perspectives on the other are unusually mutual and visible in the Summerhill community. Hence our use of the term "benign."

19. A survey of ex-Summerhillians conducted in 1999–2000 supported such a conclusion. The oral history of Lucas and Lamb (2000) would mainly support that conclusion, although a few ex-Summerhillians felt that they had been disadvantaged in terms of an increasingly credentialist economy.

20. The school was also known earlier as the "free fuck" school locally. Issues of freedom and license/licentiousness have always been in predictable and orchestrated elision (e.g., Rafferty in Lawson 1972; HMI/OfSTED Inspection Report on Summerhill School 1999).

21. Chamberlin's philosophical account of education and freedom takes individual autonomy at Summerhill to be just that: she neglects its social construction and the prevalence of "adult suggestion" (1989, 108), at least as we found it in our data. Accordingly, she takes Neill to be an extreme libertarian, and offers the usual disclaimer: "The freedom to choose what line of study to pursue and how best to pursue it is inappropriate for children whose intellectual skills are relatively underdeveloped" (p. 110).

22. Neill came to downplay psychoanalytic analysis; he concluded that the school worked as a social organization that allowed the students "freedom to be themselves (1971, 16)." He rejected his earlier stress on symbolism: "The interpretation of symbolism is always arbitrary" (p. 87).

23. In analyzing situations where risk is managed, Law and Mol point to a common kind of "utopian absolutism" (2002, 90) where justifications are offered of the kind: if human life is beyond value, then precaution X is necessary whatever the cost. In our inversion, "the bad" is foregrounded and all forms of precaution are then necessary, whatever the loss of potential "goods."

24. The discourses of accountability and audit would certainly deny this. In relation to schools "excellence," "quality," and "effectiveness," verdicts are abundant and worldwide. But they rest on narrow performances of schooling and often even fail to address questions of value. To add to our doubts, in this connection, it was these same discourses that were deployed in an attempt to close down Summerhill in 1999, though much government denial accompanied the failure of that effort (see Stronach in Vaughan 2006).

25. Rafferty was in charge of the Californian school education system. He makes OfSTED's Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI) at the time of the attempted closure of Summerhill seem measured in his views.

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