

**0639**

## **Has progressive education a future? The fall and rise of Summerhill School**

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### **Background**

The author has undertaken evaluation and research work into AS Neill's Summerhill School since 1999, initially as the School's 'expert witness' in the 2000 Tribunal Case from which the Secretary of State withdrew after 3 days. Subsequently, the author was appointed the school's 'expert' and enabled as part of the Tribunal Agreement between the DfES and Summerhill to 'inspect the inspectors' in any future OfSTED/HMI inspection of the school. Inspections followed in 2002 and 2007, resulting in the first favourable report by Inspectors into Summerhill School in its 90 year history. In addition ESRC funded case study was conducted in the school in 2006 (Stronach & Piper 2008). The current position is that the school is soon to be inspected once more, and that initial research and evaluation is currently being undertaken. Overall the case can be represented, no doubt reductively, as progressivism versus the audit culture. It is important in that the school retains a strong international reputation (Lather forthcoming, Strathern 2008), and still receives considerable media coverage, as in a recent Financial Times article by M. Engels (2009).

### **Research Questions**

What is the nature of the educational and philosophical controversies that continue to surround Summerhill?

Why are the qualities of the school so differently represented by qualitative research and by inspectorial evaluation?

How do such divergences and disagreements map on to broader differences in the political context of educational knowledge, including the sorts of arguments produced by Boltansky and Chiapello (2007) and Rizvi and Lingard (2010)?

### **Methods**

The methods employed in the empirical study draw on a range of research engagements over the years, including educational evaluation of school processes in 2000, a counter-evaluation of the OfSTED inspection findings of the 1999 inspection (2000-2), ongoing ethnographic research in relation to the 2006 case study, and recent fieldwork concerned with forthcoming inspection by OfSTED(2010). The literature consulted includes the large body of AS Neill's publications, oral history of the school (Lucas & Lamb 2000), Vaughan's edited collection on the nature of the school (2005). Such close-up literature is complemented with broader studies of the audit culture, and the work (cited above) of Boltansky & Chiapello, Rizvi & Lingard.

### **Frame**

The research combines elements of grounded theory in relation to the empirical data, and a deconstructive approach to conceptual and theoretical investments (Stronach 2010)

### **Research findings**

Understanding, criticising and disseminating the nature of education for democracy in relation to the practices of Summerhill

Theorizing the nature of the social and educational learning made possible or inhibited by such approaches to education

Offering a critique of contemporary educational approaches in particular in relation to the various operations of the audit culture

## **References**

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