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Title: Power, democracy and progressive schools

Year: 2017

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Saukkonen, S., Moilanen, P., Mathew, D., & Rapley, E. (2017). Power, democracy and progressive schools. In A. Raiker, & M. Rautiainen (Eds.), *Educating for Democracy in England and Finland : Principles and Culture* (pp. 81-92). Routledge. Routledge Research in International and Comparative Education.

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Chapter 7

Power, democracy and progressive schools

Sakari Saukkonen, Pentti Moilanen, David Mathew & Eve Rapley

Introduction

At the time of writing it is half a century since Donald Winnicott contributed to a conference on 'The Future for Progressive Education' in 1965. The title of his submission was *Do progressive schools give too much freedom to the child?* It is interesting to note that in the fifty years since Winnicott posed the question, not only have we failed to arrive at a consensus, but the matter has rarely left academe's lips. As a contribution to the on-going (and potentially irresolvable) discussion, this chapter is also an attempt to see if we can agree if Winnicott's question remains pertinent, while regarding the part that power of responsibility and choice plays in educator/learner relationships.

Writing in notes, Winnicott conjectured that progressive schools exhibited the following characteristics: "Operating from a creative if not actually *rebellious* element in someone's nature. This means that general acceptance has the effect of undermining motivation. Awkwardness in individuals may cause waste in terms of energy, but the advantage is to be measured in terms of originality, experimentation, tolerance of failure, leadership" (Winnicott, 1990:214). Although this summing-up is brief, it is compact and thought-provoking, ushering in as it does such a host of questions that one cannot help but notice certain *non-sequiturs*. For example, why should the fact that a school is spurred on by a creative element in someone's nature be a pre-requisite for the suppression of motivation? Why should "awkwardness" necessarily lead to the dissipation of (presumably student) energy?

As debatable and intellectually provocative as such points are, however, most educators would probably agree on Winnicott's final assertion: that "originality, experimentation, tolerance of failure, leadership" are positive and advantageous qualities. Winnicott was of the opinion that such traits were healthy by-products of a good progressive education; but what do we mean by *progressive*?

Progressive education and democratic schools

There is no exact definition of progressive education, but there are some characteristics that summarise the nature of it; self-determined learning and a learning community based on equality and mutual respect. Pedagogical progressivism means teaching young people:

...the skills they need in order to learn any subject, instead of focusing on transmitting a particular subject...promoting discovery and self-directed learning by the

student...work[ing] on projects that express student purposes and that integrate the disciplines around socially relevant themes...promoting values of community, cooperation, tolerance, justice and democratic equality (Labaree, 2005:277).

Korkmaz & Erden (2014) define the characteristics of democratic schools. The first and most important characteristics are their strong principles and philosophy. Democratic schools have been established to provide an alternative to mainstream education. The number of democratic schools worldwide is not known exactly, although according to the listing by the Alternative Education Resource Organization (n.d), there are about 270 schools and centers in 34 countries that describe themselves as democratic. The second characteristic of democratic schools is their participative decision-making mechanisms. In the most radical form, democracy is manifested in democratic schools in the direct participation of everybody in school administration with equal votes (*ibid.*). According to the European Democratic Education Community (n.d):

Democratic schools have school meetings in which all members of the community have an equal vote, regardless of age or status. Students and teachers can sit together as equals to discuss and vote on school rules, curricula, projects, the hiring of staff and even budgetary matters.

The pedagogies of the democratic school are usually based on flexibility, learner suitability, active participation, and individualization according to learner needs. The democratic schools movement – a radical species of progressive education – stresses the characteristic of democratic equality. This means that every member of the school community has equal power. Is this idea a romantic illusion or is a definitive characteristic of good education?

Power within education

Power can be considered as a system of control and a tool that teachers can use over their students, over their colleagues and over the students' parents. Teachers are also affected by the power of these same groups of people; furthermore, they are affected by the power wielded by educational authorities and by traditions and ideologies. In a larger picture power can be defined as a set of relations among actors.

Power can also be considered along more nuanced lines, with its weight and utility being positioned along a power spectrum, with 'hard power' at one pole, and soft power at the other. The concepts of hard power and soft power describe two different ways of using power. These concepts are mainly used in the research of world politics but the might also be helpfully applied to progressive schools in order to understand the ways in which power is used. Hard power is based on commands, coercion, inducements and threats, whereas soft power is based rather on persuasion and argument and ability to entice and attract. Successful use of soft power shapes actors preferences and makes them to want what the power-user wants them to want (Jones, 2009; Nye & Wang, 2009).

Power can be further understood as a network of relations and as a structuring force (Hannus & Simola, 2010). Opposite to the layman's idea of power as a purely repressive force, we can adapt Foucault's idea of generative power (Foucault, 1981). Actors have different resources to build upon and they are differently positioned. This leads to a Bourdieusian view of the importance of practices and social positions. As Hannus and Simola (2010) conclude, the idea of generative power is a combination of Foucault and Bourdieu.

Methodology

From this perspective a case study of the lower secondary Alppila School in Helsinki Finland becomes interesting. Alppila School has aimed to be a democratic school over the years, but how successful has this been? In a democratic school power relations among teachers and students are different to mainstream schools; power has to be re-distributed and negotiated. This should be visible in daily practices, routines, and discourses. In order to evaluate the success of Alppila School, during the winter of 2014/15 semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with four staff members: the headmaster, vice-headmaster, a subject teacher in social sciences and history, and a guidance counsellor. The headmaster and vice-headmaster were interviewed twice, on each occasion of our two visits to the school. In addition we followed five different lessons during the two visits. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed by a research assistant. During the lessons we wrote notes.

From this material the most typical narratives which shaped the basic groundings in terms of conceptions and practices of pedagogical power in school were located. The analysis was based on techniques of close reading and narrative research (Bold, 2012). In this case study, we relied on the interviews, but our observations and experiences during the two visits influenced our interpretations and conclusions of them. During the two days we spent in Alppila School, we gathered a sense of what it is like to live, learn, learn and teach there. Our research foci were the teachers and the ways they executed, articulated and used their pedagogical power over their pupils and how this pedagogical power was distributed among teachers. The distribution of pedagogical power tells us what kind of community Alppila School is in terms of democracy. In describing this we have to evaluate in parallel the power used by the school authorities, headmaster, teachers and students. We use the findings made to discuss 'progressiveness' in relation to concepts of democracy with a progressive school in England, Summerhill in Leiston, Suffolk.

Alppila School

The Alppila neighbourhood has historically been inhabited by working class people although this feature is diminishing. During the last decades people with higher incomes have moved to Alppila as real estate prices have raised. The school principal described pupils as '...more colourful than in some other schools so near the centre'.

The Alppila School was established in 1959 as a state run experimental school. Its mission was to develop new pedagogy and prepare a new pedagogical vision for Finnish schools. The

school was municipalized in 1972 when the comprehensive school started in Helsinki as one of the latest cities in Finland. After this there have been many pedagogical developmental projects in the school supported by the educational authorities of the Finnish state and also the city of Helsinki. In relation to other Finnish schools, Alppila School may be called progressive but one has to remember that Finnish schools are quite traditional.

The school is basically a lower secondary school for teenagers 13-16 years old. It has 7th, 8th and 9th grades. In Alppila School, structures of schooling are diverse. There are no age based classes or basic groups. In an administrative sense there are, but because pupils are given freedom in choosing their studies, those basic groups very seldom form the basis for studying. The Alppila School curriculum is phenomenon-based. This means that school subjects have mostly vanished from course headlines. At the beginning of every course, the teacher invites the pupils to join in a meeting focused on deciding how the course should be implemented. Pupils also are asked to discuss what the exact content and aims of the course should be and, more importantly, what would be the best ways to learn the content? Should we use textbooks, internet databases, individual or group work, and what is the role of the teacher?

The Helsinki School Authority administers all municipal schools in Helsinki, including the comprehensive and upper secondary schools of the city. Equality between the schools seems to be important. Officially all schools are equally good and the School Authority encourages schools to share their expertise. Schools are encouraged to initiate pedagogical development. Sharing the result of this development is considered to be one way of supporting the equality of schools. This suggests that the official line that all schools are equally good is questionable.

The headmaster describes the relationship between her school and the School Authority quite warmly. She receives support from the School Authority whenever she needs it but never in an authoritative, controlling or prescriptive manner. When we asked the headmaster and vice-headmaster if the School Authority has ever prohibited some of the school initiatives the answer was abrupt - never. In her mind the School Authority is eager to listen to what she has to say and there seems to be mutual respect.

“How the Helsinki school authority is present in everyday school life, well, there has been a tremendous change over the decades. The authority is more and more present on school level in a way there is a channel for sharing information and ideas. There is a sense of openness and both sides listen to each other.”

The education providers, usually the local education authorities and the schools themselves, draw up their own curricula within the framework of the national core curriculum. Accordingly the city of Helsinki has prepared its own curriculum based on the national core curriculum. In Alppila School much effort was put into writing the latest school curriculum. As part of this, a working group of teachers took advantage of the general nature of the national core curriculum to select and write the curriculum in a language that was

understandable for the students, their parents and also for the teachers. They used their expertise and the autonomy enjoyed by Finnish teachers to create a curriculum that would serve the best interests of both students and school.

Teacher autonomy in Finland finds expression in the understanding shared throughout the community that every teacher in Alppila School may teach in the way he or she wants to because teachers are *the* experts in education. This kind of pedagogical freedom is very dear to Finnish teachers. The role of the headmaster is simply to encourage and support teachers, not to direct and control them. The relationship between coercion and conceptions of self-worth is understood. If teachers were forced to adopt certain pedagogy, the older teachers particularly would feel that their work was not valued. So pedagogical freedom is connected to wellbeing and the feeling of being valued, and therefore it should not be questioned.

An Alppila School Board includes representatives of parents, teachers and students, and it formally ratifies decisions made by the school community concerning major topics (budget, curriculum etc.). As these decisions include the results of collaboration between students and teachers, the approach of the Board can be said to be progressive. However at Alppila, as at other Finnish schools, headmaster have power and can use it as s/he thinks fit. In other words, the democratic process can be over-ruled. The potential of widening power relations is mediated, though, through the headmaster sharing his leadership role with the vice-headmaster and executive group (headmaster, vice-headmaster and three teachers). Overall, our discussions with the Alppila School headmaster and vice-head demonstrated democratic process through the emergence of three predominant themes: openness, discussions and teachers' pedagogical freedom. This comes through strongly in the headmaster's assessment of teacher autonomy and collaboration at Alppila, in which she concluded:

“Of course there has been self-willed teachers in the past doing things solo, but it has changed a lot. You don't see anybody locking the classroom door and doing things on your own, it just does not happen anymore.”

This is significant because in Finnish schools there is a long tradition of teachers working in isolation from other teachers, a practice that can be seen as a positive feature as it indicates expertise and autonomy (Afdal, 2014; Simola, 2005). In Alppila School there is a strong culture of negotiating and sharing amongst teachers. The vice-head said that the headmaster frequently wants teachers to discuss topics and to take part in the subsequent decision-making. We asked if there is opposition among teachers towards those decisions and if they have to compromise between rival conceptions or principles. No opposition and only a few compromises was the answer. One reason for this is that most teachers have been working at the school for some years and they know each other. In past years there have been cliques among the teachers but not anymore. Openness and discussions go hand in hand in Alppila School. So the pedagogical freedom noted above is a shared as well as being an individual freedom. However, openness and discussion cannot be seen as a determinant of

progressiveness at Alppila; according to recent work by Sahlberg (2011), there has been a change from isolation to collaboration in many other Finnish schools.

So collaboration between School Board, headmaster and senior teachers, teachers and students all collaborate is indicative of the potential of power-sharing relations. This is made possible *via* various groups: the School Board as outlined above, subject groups and smaller teacher teams. These groups are for discussion but also for preparing everyday activities and developmental actions in school life. Having power in Alppila School as a teacher is related to her or his willingness to take part in various groups. Evidence suggests that the curriculum group in particular seems to have had a major impact on the learning culture at Alppila School. One of the subject teachers (NN), stressed that teachers are able to influence their work through choosing subject content and appropriate pedagogies. We discussed above the democratic approach taken by teachers at Alppila to write the curriculum in user-friendly language. However, encouraging *students* to take part in the democratic opportunities available to them appears to be an issue.

In line with the school's democratic ideals, the students have power in school in educational matters but not all of them want to use that power. There are only about 20-30 active students out of the 400 who take part in various student associations. We were informed by the staff that the tutoring group, environmental agent group and student council are the main channels for participation. Also the immersion in Swedish language course students are exceptionally active. There are also two student members on the school board. Considering the school's democratic ethos and the efforts made by teachers for power-sharing, the proportion of students taking part in these formal activities provided by school is small.

The same reluctance to engage was seen in students' response to student centred pedagogies. We were told that at the beginning of every course, the teacher invites the pupils to join in a meeting focused on deciding how the course should be implemented. NN told us that the students are not very active in proposing new ways for learning, and that many students are satisfied with teacher centred teaching methods. This notion was confirmed in an interview with the school guidance counsellor, who found it strange that students do not use their opportunities to influence their learning. The headmaster also warned us in the first interview that we will not see progressive pedagogy but quite traditional teaching methods in the school. We followed seven different classes over two school days, and our observations confirmed the headmasters' view. To be honest, we were a little disappointed.

NN is still dreaming of students being more active but is not frustrated with student passivity. He does admit that there is a certain conflict of ideals and reality in this respect. Nevertheless NN described the teacher/student relationship as direct and non-formal. Teachers have to be sensitive and flexible with the students. When asked how teachers experience the active students he said that these students were a helping hand for teachers. The next week after the first interview there were both Statute Labour Day and 'open doors day' events at the school. In both of these students seemed to have quite a central role in planning activities with teachers.

Having illustrated Alppila School and the ways in which democracy is valued, how democratic decision are made, and the stakeholders involved, we move now to introduce an English progressive school as a means of comparison.

A progressive school in England

A.S. Neill and his Summerhill School are considered by many as being the bedrock upon which progressive, democratic schools are founded. Creative and original, Summerhill proudly pronounces itself as being “the oldest child democracy in the world” (Summerhill School, n.d). Its progressive outlook has not always been well viewed by others within the English education system. Indeed, the school successfully fought off the UK government Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) who sought to close Summerhill in the 1990s, claiming an inadmissible philosophy with abysmal practices (Stronach, 2012).

Founded in 1921, Summerhill was created as a ‘non-repressive environment’ where students would be able to become ‘...self-motivated and self-directed students who would never lose the early joy of learning (Andersen et al, 2002:2). As a proponent of democratic education, Neill and others of his ilk argued that students who are endowed with ‘...freedom and choice will ultimately become better democratic citizens because they have learned how to negotiate with others, to name obstacles, and to know themselves’ (Morrison, 2008:54).

Summerhill School is a fee paying, non-religious independent school, primarily made up of students who board at the school, with many coming from all over the world. With a school community of around a hundred people, 75 of which are children aged 5 to 17 (Summerhill School, n.d), the school has served as a model democratic schools internationally (Stronach & Piper, 2008). There are timetabled activities and most students do sit the General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations towards the end of their time at Summerhill, although there is no compulsion to attend lessons. Students are also able to enjoy ‘...free access to art, woodwork and computers. There are also open areas where pupils not in classes can hang out, amuse themselves, socialise, play games, be creative’ (*ibid.*).

Staff and students are stakeholders in the ongoing democratic life of the school, with teachers being expected to ‘...value classroom activities and play equally’ (*ibid.*), whilst older students (Ombudsmen) can take the role of mediators to provide support between meetings, as well as resolving conflicts (*ibid.*). Unlike mainstream schools in England, Summerhill does not send school reports to parents, nor comply with the Ofsted regulation of “tracking children's progress through the school” (Clifton, 2014:38).

The 2014 Summerhill General Policy Statement (Community Life) outlines fundamental tenets upon which the school operates, stating;

- Summerhill students live as equal members in a democratic community
- Any member of the community, pupil or staff, has the right to charge another or bring up a business in the General Meeting, or call a Special Meeting about anything they

wish to. Thus both pupils and staff are answerable to the whole community. Nobody in the school is exempt from this, and no subject is beyond the community's discussion

The democratic principles upon which the school is founded is firmly rooted in the school rules (laws), of which there are around 200, and the notion of 'The Meeting'. The laws guide the everyday life of the school, from rules about smoking and who can use particular toilet facilities, to a means of managing bullies and establishing the policy regarding the use of profane language beyond the school grounds. These laws are constituted and decided upon by staff and students on a one person-one vote basis (Stronach & Piper, 2008) within the confines of 'The Meeting'. Within this collective arena, problems of the community can be organised and managed (Clifton, 2014).

Comparing Alppila with Summerhill

In broad terms Alppila and Summerhill share many progressive features. Alppila has clearly both ideologically and practically 'borrowed' from Summerhill by virtue of its own use of a school council, by not having age related classes and by using student – staff negotiation with regard to what and how to study a particular subject. At first glance, it might be assumed that Alppila is as progressive and democratic as Summerhill. But upon closer scrutiny of both schools we are compelled to question the extent to which Alppila has achieved its aspiration to be a progressive, democratic school whereby students and staff share power *via* a negotiated and equally distributed model. We also need to return to the opening question posed by Donald Winnicott, namely; 'Do progressive schools give too much freedom to the child?' Given what has been observed by us in Alppila School, coupled with our discussions regarding democratic education and Summerhill, are we now able to offer a definitive response to this question, a question which has hitherto failed to achieve consensus amongst educators for nearly 50 years?

Discussion

We proffer a response to Winnicott's question, and this that such schools do not afford too much freedom to the children who attend them. This conclusion is based upon both the empirical primary evidence gathered within Alppila School, and from the extant literature regarding Summerhill School.

We argue that the positive impact of the democratic schools movement, particularly the legacy of A. S Neill and Summerhill School is one that is felt today, not only in progressive democratic schools but in mainstream schools around the world. The United Nations Committee of Rights of the Child is unequivocal in its position regarding the influence of Summerhill upon children and the ways in which its progressive and democratic principles have directly shaped the Rights of the Child convention. When acting as Secretary of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Paulo David confirmed the role played by Summerhill by commenting, 'The convention of the Rights of the Child makes particular reference to

children's rights to participate in decisions affecting them and Summerhill, through its very approach to education, embodies this right in a way that surpasses expectation' (Bailey, 2013:157).

The reach of Summerhill extends further *via* the model of school councils, which are integral to mainstream schools within the UK, yet which can trace their roots back to Summerhill with its meetings and ombudsmen model. The premise of school councils with pupils electing fellow peers to represent the views of all pupils and to improve their school are directly influenced by the democratic and egalitarian principles espoused by Summerhill.

Other external validation and approval of Summerhill and its quest for instilling and fostering democracy comes from Ofsted. Despite well publicised historic dissonance between this UK government audit inspectorate and the liberal philosophies of Summerhill, the 2011 *Ofsted Report* judged the school as being good overall but outstanding in regard to its quality of provision for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and for the behaviour of its pupils. According to Ofsted (2011) strengths of the school include:

...the mature and co-operative interactions between pupils and staff that lead to closely-tailored activities matching the needs, abilities and interests of every individual pupil. As a result, all pupils have opportunities to acquire and develop a love of learning and interest in the world (2011:5).

The *Report* continues by describing how pupils develop clarity on:

...how to live their lives and there is a tangible atmosphere of tolerance and harmony...The democratic approach to how the school runs ensures that pupils develop a high level of respect for the privacy of others. Pupils are prepared for their future lives and responsibilities extremely well' (*ibid.*:6).

We take the view that if the democratic and progressive schools offered 'too much freedom', why would influential bodies such as the United Nations and Ofsted, as well as mainstream schools globally adopt its key principles and philosophical ideals? Clearly such wholesale embracing of democratic principles can only sensibly be seen as being an endorsement for freedom, and a rejection of notions of 'too much freedom'.

Having refuted 'too much freedom' as being the issue, we contend this chapter and our small scale investigation at Alppila School has revealed the disparity in the way in which democratic decision making and power is distributed between the English and Finnish examples. In Alppila and Summerhill schools one can notice examples of both 'hard' and 'soft' power but the emphasis seems to be on 'soft' power, power that is based on persuasion and argument rather than one based on coercion or threats. Given the philosophical outlook of each school, this is perhaps unsurprising. What we are faced with is to wonder who has the power? It is equally distributed or does one or more stakeholder have more of it than another?

The 2011 *Ofsted Report* on Summerhill singles out the School Council for praise, describing it as being a forum where ‘...pupils and staff meet to share and discuss information and make decisions as a community of equals... pupils are extremely skilled in assuming roles such as Chair, Secretary and Ombudsmen’ (*ibid.*:5). We contend this appears to point towards a more egalitarian and balanced relationship between students and staff than might be said to be seen at Alppila School.

In terms of active engagement participation in their learning, the 2011 *Ofsted Report* comments that pupils are engaged and ‘...absorbed in what they are doing and make good progress, both in lessons and in the other activities they choose to do’ (*ibid.*:5). This does not appear to be the case with Alppila School. As described by those of us who observed classes at Alppila School, and by Alppila staff themselves, issues of passivity were seen and reported. Comments from teachers hoping students would become more active and from those of us who observed classes who reported being ‘disappointed’ by the classroom interaction, are in sharp relief to the portrayal of Summerhill.

There is no strong democratic tradition in Finnish schools. Even though Finnish schools may be said to base on humanistic and holistic pedagogy, traditionally the students do not have much to say to what, how and when to learn. At Alppila the power and responsibility concomitant with democracy has been offered by staff, yet has not been readily accepted by the Alppila students when compared to their English peers at Summerhill.

The Alppila case shows that students are not all willing to take the power into their hands. Naturally we are left to consider why this might be? Alppila may be considered as a newcomer in the progressive, democratic schools tradition, but it does stress values like respect, equality, justice, collaboration, and solidarity (Korkmaz & Erden, 2014). In attempting to live up to these values Alppila does use phenomenon-based studies where teachers and students have an active role in the planning of these projects. We believe that phenomenon-based project studies are an important step in giving to students more power in Finnish schools, but this step is not enough if the students do not get opportunities to exert more power to influence about how and what they study in their in subject studies. This juxtaposition of a democratic learning culture with the phenomenon-based studies with a more traditional, authoritarian learning culture associated with subject studies creates an uncomfortable contradiction. We suggest that this lack of a uniform approach to infusing democratic, consultative approaches is likely to contribute to the passive approaches seen and reported. We also suggest that reasons for the unwillingness of many students to fully participate and to plunge themselves into a liberating, democratic culture lies beyond the confines of Alppila. The reticence observed by us and described by staff is symptomatic of historical, cultural and socio-political factors which shape Finland and the traditions in which Finnish society operates.

Concluding thoughts

There can be no doubt that Alppila does subscribe to educating for democracy, but it has not been fully realised as yet. In Alppila school those who we interviewed mentioned several

times the ‘Alppila spirit’. This spirit unifies the members of the school community and creates a strong culture of conversations and tolerance for difference. What we have identified is that, unlike Summerhill, Alppila is on a different trajectory towards becoming a progressive democratic school. It is starting from a different time, from a different place, and from within a society where ideas surrounding education are more conservative and bound up in more traditional, authoritarian model of education. Unlike Summerhill where power is willingly shared by and between staff and students, the power at Alppila does seem to be more in the hands of the staff. Only when this is more democratically distributed and exercised can Alppila be considered to be a truly democratic, progressive school.

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