

# EUDEC Newsletter



## Happy 90th Birthday Summerhill!

### SUMMERHILL 90 YEARS OLD

By Zoë Readhead

Summerhill, the surviving grandparent of free schools, reaches its 90<sup>th</sup> birthday this year. It is proud to have maintained its values, philosophy and strong community life since its inception in 1921. In other words, it is proud not to have progressed!

All around us is a modern view that ignores the successful examples of the past, assuming that only the new and innovative can solve our problems. Summerhill is not just a school: it is a pattern for life, and any society living by the basic and true values that are, or should be, an intrinsic part of human nature, such as tolerance, understanding, compromise and honesty, cannot go out of date.

In today's changing world there are many forces that Summerhill must respond to, such as Safeguarding Children (child protection), Health & Safety and the need for constant documentation as well as new requirements for college entries and immigration. And that's without even mentioning OFSTED, our nemesis!

Against these odds Summerhill is as committed now as it has ever been to strongly defending its values and ethos of freedom and equality for the child. This keeps the school in a vulnerable position because it dares to push boundaries and challenge modern paternalistic childcare expectations.

Summerhill is still a school where you can play all day, climb high trees, make toy guns or roll over and over in a

### In this Issue

#### Happy Birthday Summerhill!

Summerhill 90 Years Old	1
A Graduate's Perspective	3
A Student's Perspective	4
A Teacher's Perspective	5

#### News and Events

IDEC@EUDEC 2011	7
-----------------	---

#### Regional News

Students' Conference in Germany	8
Fighting for Change in Berlin	9
Meetings in Spain and Italy	10

#### Articles

Review of Recent Research	11
Freedom in Nursery School	15



A.S. Neill's  
summerhill

a cardboard box giggling, instead of being in class. Where you can become an artist instead of a scientist or a scientist instead of a footballer. Where you can take a leading



role in community life or learn to support it by just being around and caring. As children grow up in the school community it is not always an easy time. There can be periods of boredom, of missing home, of insecurity, of doubt. These things are part of growing up anywhere, and Summerhill doesn't profess to expel them. But it does provide a place of empowerment where children are supported, can discover their own interests



and direction and, at times, push their own boundaries.

If A.S. Neill were to visit his old school today, what would he think?

I feel sure that he would be delighted with what he would find. He would marvel at the intricacies of the World Wide Web, of kids on mobile phones, and he would smile or even chuckle to himself to see that in spite of all this the Summerhill children are still full of imagination, play and creativity, can still be silly, get dirty and enjoy the things that children everywhere love to do.



Now Summerhill is, amazingly, celebrating 90 years of children's freedom, while across Europe and the world there are thousands of children having a better and more humane childhood in schools and homes inspired by this man's vision. Thank you Big Neill, we are forever in your debt!



**Zoë Readhead**  
Principal  
[Summerhill School](#)



*"Summerhill has always been an inspiration. It is vividly and solidly living proof, that democratic schools are no "experiments" anymore - for decades! Summerhill has proven (alongside all the other ~200 democratic schools on the planet which came after Summerhill) that democratic education is a very valid educational model. After 90 years of Summerhill's prosperous existence it is about time for the educational professionals in the world to finally acknowledge this and to act accordingly, helping democratic schools to become available as an option to every child on earth."*

**Niklas Gidion**, Kapriole, Freiburg/Germany



# A Graduate's Perspective...

By Anna Ramm

I'm not going to try to hide the overenthusiastic cheesiness of my feelings towards Summerhill... I was a pupil from age 7 to 17 and my memories of being there create a nostalgic glowing ball in my chest which threatens to explode every time I think of it. I have no idea where I would be now if I hadn't been there... It helped me to gain confidence in myself, and helped me to grow up without turning out too much of an idiot. I don't mean that I'm not stupid – isn't everyone? But I do feel that I am accepting of the people around me and considerate of other people's opinions.



When I first started at Summerhill, I wouldn't have said boo to a goose. Somehow, by the end of my time there I felt comfortable and confident enough to voice my opinions in meetings. I was a school ombudsman, beddies officer and chairman. I organised events to raise money for Amnesty International and worked on the lounge for the End of Term parties. I did lots of other stuff too – film making and photography, drama, singing and just... stuff. Summerhill allowed me to explore possibilities and made me feel that I could do anything. That's a pretty awesome feeling.

When I left Summerhill and started college, it was a bit of a culture shock. I had kind of assumed that it would all be fine, but I found it quite difficult. There were only a

few people there that I got on with and I found it frustrating not being able to manage my own time. The course was really badly organised and it tried my patience. I found myself back being the quiet, shy one. In my second year, I embraced being alone and worked on projects independently. I didn't attend college much, but I did the work and read the "Learning Objectives" and got good grades. Although the day it finally ended was a happy one, I am really glad that I went there. It made me more tolerant and more independent in the big wide world beyond school.

So far, my university experience is much, much better. The course is based at a TV studio in Norwich and we have a social space which is shared with the other 2 years of the course. There's a community feel to the place and I can wholeheartedly say that I love it. I'm not so shy these days. I can talk to people I don't know and I'm not petrified by asking a person at a desk for a train ticket. Of course, it's not all down to Summerhill but it does play a big role.

Summerhill gave me time to develop as a person in a supportive community and follow my own interests without the restriction of compulsory lessons. I sang in a band and travelled to Athens to perform at a festival, I made films and helped to set up EUDEC. Life after Summerhill was hard at first. My early interest in photography and film has led me to a degree in Film-Making at my first choice university. One might say: "You can take the girl out of Summerhill but you can't take Summerhill out of the girl." Thank you, Summerhill.



**Anna Ramm**, graduate of [Summerhill](#), England

P.S. We (some ex-Summerhillians) are going on a bike ride from Scotland to Summerhill in July, to say "Happy Birthday". We'll have a blog and all that jazz, so you can follow us on our journey.

*"I've never been there, but even by reading books about it and meeting the people I can sense what a wonderful place it is. Summerhill has been an inspiration to many different forms of education, and without it the education landscape wouldn't look so diverse and hopeful today!"*

**Maaïke Eggermont**, Sudbury Gent, Belgium

## A Student's Perspective...

By Ruby McGuire

When I first heard about Summerhill, I thought it was made up. I couldn't understand how kids could be equal to adults, or choose whether they wanted to go to lessons or not. It seemed unbelievable. I've been at Summerhill for nearly three years now, and it's hard for me to remember how I ever coped in other schools. Summerhill just feels right.

I think that the best way to truly understand Summerhill is to visit, and to see a few meetings. They're the heart of the school, and when I miss them I feel like I've missed out on a lot. In my last school, a comprehensive secondary school, I was on the school council. We met once a month and suggested our ideas to a teacher, who would show fake enthusiasm before telling us that unfortunately, our ideas weren't going to be used. The school council was supposed to give us a feeling of involvement in our school, but if anything it just highlighted what little say we had in anything. The Summerhill meeting is completely different. Everyone has a voice that is listened to and respected, and if you have an idea, you can propose it. Of course, this doesn't mean that every single person's proposals will be carried, but when the whole school is voting on them it makes a big difference. You feel like you have the power to change things.

I think that the meeting has given me so much confidence. Talking in front of a room of people is a scary thing to do in general, but expressing your opinions when you know that not everyone will agree is a lot harder. Once I got over my initial fear, it felt amazing. The ability to speak my mind clearly and with confidence is a skill I'll keep forever.

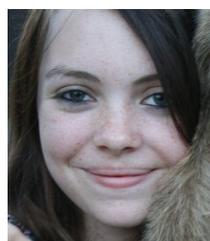
The thing that shocked me the most when I first heard about Summerhill was the fact that lessons and exams are completely optional. On my first day I went to every sin-

gle lesson, because that seemed like the right thing to do. By the end of my first term, I hadn't been to lessons for weeks. I'm not sure if I was rebelling against the state system, or if I was just too busy. I think I learnt more in that first term than I ever did in my two years at secondary school. I learnt how to climb trees, and how to sneak out after lights out, and other things that I'd thought were too young for me. I learnt how to have fun, which was something I was starting to think that, at 13, I was too old for. Eventually I started going to lessons again. I took an exam last year, and I'm taking more this year. Without any pressure from anyone, I learnt a lot faster than I would have at state school.

I'm 16 now, and next term will be my last term at Summerhill. Although I'm sad that I'm leaving, I'm not scared about life after Summerhill, because being here has changed me. I used to be shy, self-conscious and terrified of adults. Last week I went to a college interview, and the interviewer complimented me on how articulate I was, and how I didn't seem at all nervous. That never would have happened three years ago.

I've mainly talked about how Summerhill has affected me, but it affects other people in so many amazing ways. In the time I've been here, I've seen other shy children, or angry children, or children who - like me - had forgotten how to have fun, and I've seen them develop into these amazing people with amazing personalities.

Summerhill may not be perfect, but no school is, and in my eyes Summerhill will always be the happiest school in the world.



**Ruby McGuire**, student at [Summerhill](#), England



# A Teacher's Perspective...

By Leonard Turton

This is my ninth year at Summerhill. Before this, I spent eight years as co-principal of a democratic day school in Canada, as well as many years practicing as much democracy as possible in an inner city state school.

So it's Summerhill's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday; what's it like being a teacher here? Scenes and contexts play a major role.

Summerhill is a boarding school on 11 acres of countryside on the edge of the small town of Leiston, Suffolk, UK. It's about 10 minutes from the North Sea. It's far far away; on a good day, two trains and a taxi away from London. Summerhill has many buildings scattered about its 11 acres. None are posh, some are even caravans, former stables and once-upon-a-time railway carriages. The main building was an old Victorian brick mansion. This is the iconic image of the school.

**I live far far away.** In 2 rooms. Overlooking a lovely field and garden.

Summerhill is a village of people from 7 years old to 65. That is important to remember. It doesn't actually function the same way a democratic day school does. It's a community of people who live together seven days a week in a cluster of countryside buildings. It is tribal; it is like an extended family.

**I am a grandfather in an extended family.**

Summerhill is international. Walk around and you can be walking with people from Spain, the Netherlands, mainland China, Taiwan, Germany, Brazil, the United States, New Zealand, Italy, Korea, Japan, France, Poland and other countries as well. The world meets in the village of Summerhill.



**I teach in a world village.**

I live ninety seconds from my classroom and although I sometimes have to dodge a chicken it's a pretty easy commute to work. I teach Class 2, which means 10 to 13 year olds. Class 2 is in 'the Stables' and is a four area multipurpose space for projects, reading, games, computer work, making tea and coffee as well as doing math lessons. I kind of play conductor, which is fun. I suggest projects, start projects I like, assist with kid-initiated activities when asked, and teach formally when children want a math lesson.

**I work in an area of maximum creativity.**

In any kind of day school children are in a fairly confined area with adults and are 'at school'. This is not the case at Summerhill. Children wake up and decide what kind of building or space they want to go to, and for how long. To compare, it would be like a democratic day school in a town where the children didn't actually have to go to the school at all. They could just say goodbye to mom and dad and go to the city library or the park or hang out in the square. Then go to the school for an hour. Maybe. Then go back home and read a book. Except, of course, Summerhill students don't even have to say goodbye to mom and dad. With the 11 acres and the many buildings of Summerhill all adults, except for health and safety situations, can completely disappear to a child ... if they so wish. And that means the child is happily living in a children's village democracy. This is quite a profound experience.



**I am often made to disappear.**

Being an adult at Summerhill is like being a birdwatcher. The kids fly in, muck about, and fly out. If we want a picture of a student at Summerhill the staff gather and add their individual sightings.

*Seeing the challenges of operating a democratic school today, 90 years after the founding Summerhill School and in a completely different society, we have great respect and appreciation to the founders of Summerhill School! And we are so happy to have you in our community as an example that it works! Enjoy your celebration! We wish you smiling faces throughout.*

**Muran Juerg Mueller**, Lindenschule, Switzerland

**I am a bird watcher.**

So Class 2 is just one building in the village and the children come in and then go away. It is usually fairly busy in Class 2 because the children seem to like the space and they even like math but some days there might be no one there at all.

**Sometimes I am all alone.**

As a teacher at Summerhill you have to come to terms with the fact you aren't important. Way less important than in a state school and considerably less important than in a democratic day school.

This cannot be underestimated: as a day school teacher you can go home at night and on weekends. At Summerhill you cannot. A teacher is a constant participant; in the manner that each chooses to be. And because this is a free and equal place it is impossible to hide yourself. Smart parts and dumb parts will all tumble out. The community will know you. The children will know you.

**Summerhill is an x-ray machine.**

Summerhill has never been shy about being a school and offering open activities as well as timetabled lessons in spaces of various designs. Then the children decide to show up or not. If children want lessons you need to be a good teacher. It's a small school and that means you get to be your own department head and can, within reason, be as creative and as innovative as you wish to be. This sounds like fun but can also be scary. You need self-confidence and the ability to relate to children's interests and practical needs, negotiating as well as deciding.

**My work is complex.**

Summerhill comes with a daunting 90 years of history and tradition. We know about Neill and his philosophy. He was quite an iconic figure. This is not a burden since Neill

always insisted that those after him should never slavishly imitate. Neill's family, his daughter and grandchildren, still own and run the school. Spend time here and you will clearly see that the family fiercely maintains Neill's freedom equation for children. This gives Summerhill an unshakeable foundation upon which to improvise; rather than being confining this is liberating.

I can work knowing that the children's freedom in democratic community will never be questioned.

90 years. This is hard to get your head around. It means decade after decade has rolled by and the school has been awash with each ... the 1920's for heaven's sake, the 30's, 40's ... the 60's, ... 90's and so on. The place, except for its basic philosophy, never stands still. In my nine years here the changes ... in school laws, in buildings and their uses, in resources, curriculums, community interests, the structure of the day, the time and number and shape of meetings etc. have been never ending ... and that is a lot of fun.

I teach in a constantly changing environment that has deep roots and 90 years of its own culture.

When I get up in the morning I step out my door into a village of 100 people I know and who all know me. Kind of like human life is supposed to be, I think.

Oh, and finally ... the holidays. Since this is an international school and many children need to fly home we have very lovely long holidays.

Which is nice.



**Leonard Turton** has been a Curriculum Advisor and teacher at [Summerhill](#) since 2002.

*"Summerhill changed my life. Reading the Summerhill book when I was 13 years old was a revolution in my mind. I finally found the answer to all the frustrations I had in school. To me it was obvious: all schools should be like Summerhill! And the result would be happy and intelligent children and a much better world to live in. Summerhill's logo with the sentence 'Founded in 1921, still ahead of its time' is as true as ever!"*

**Rikke Knudsen**, Den Demokratiske Skole, Roskilde, Denmark

# IDEC@EUDEC 2011

By Chloe Duff

## An Invitation

Here at Sands School excitement is really starting to build up as we are counting down time until the IDEC@EUDEC Conference. More and more people are starting to get seriously involved in preparations, and brilliant ideas for things to do at the conference are popping up all the time. Everyone at Sands School would like to warmly invite you to come and join us at the IDEC@EUDEC Conference, here in July. We can't wait to welcome everyone to beautiful Devon, show you our school and share an amazing conference together. So, if you haven't already booked your place at the IDEC@EUDEC Conference click on this link and it will take you straight to the registration page:

[http://www.ideceudec.org/?page\\_id=331](http://www.ideceudec.org/?page_id=331)



Students and teachers from Sands School at the IDEC@EUDEC Conference venue

## Registration News

We are very excited to announce that we have 278 people registered to attend the IDEC@EUDEC Conference. The participants registered are coming from 22 different countries, 133 are students and 145 are adults and they are representing 48 schools and organisations from around the world.

## Discounts

If you book before the 30<sup>th</sup> April you will be eligible for some of the big discounts available, including £50 off the regular standard fees and £25 off the already discounted student fee. Group discounts are also available.

## Programme

We have had some really interesting and exciting offers of workshops and lectures from participants attending the IDEC@EUDEC Conference and a list of these workshops will be published within the next couple of weeks so keep a look out for news about this on the conference website –

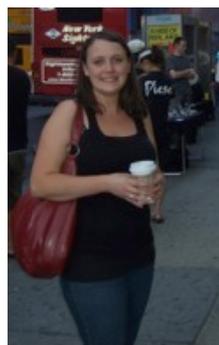
[www.ideceudec.org](http://www.ideceudec.org).

## Speakers

As one of the leading visionaries in democratic education in the last century, author of many books on education and co-founder of Sands School we are honoured to have David Gribble opening the IDEC@EUDEC Conference.

We are happy to confirm that Matthew Davis will be one of the keynote speakers at the IDEC@EUDEC Conference and will be talking about the issue of inclusion in democratic education. I saw Matt speak at the AERO Conference last June and he really blew me away. He touched on things that were uncomfortable for some people to hear but are vital to address if we are going to help education develop, evolve and grow. Matt captivated the audience, made people laugh, cry, shout and think, bringing new ideas to the discussion.

More speakers will be announced soon.



**Chloe Duff** is a former Sands student and, as well as coordinating the [IDEC@EUDEC Conference](http://www.ideceudec.org), is a member of the EUDEC Council.



# Students' Conference in Germany

## A student's report:

In Chemnitz, Germany, on the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> March there was a meeting of 250 students, mostly from state schools, about democracy in school. Five of us from the Freie Schule Leipzig went there. After dropping off our bags and having dinner we had a welcome talk. Then we went to a concert; it was in an old railway station. There were three bands playing jazz and other music. It was an alcohol-free event, and everyone had fun and danced anyway.

On Saturday, we got woken by music at 6:30 a.m. and had a nice breakfast. At 9 a.m. we had an opening meeting where we sat in a big circle and heard about the day.

The whole day was open space. Many people didn't know what open space was. Anyone could make a workshop about topics they wanted to discuss. Everyone could choose what they wanted to do when. Within half an hour there were 50 workshops planned for the day.

After a day of intensive discussion and workshops we had a fun evening. There was a cocktail bar (of course non-alcoholic), a disco with VJs, a chill lounge and karaoke.



On Sunday there was a closing session. Everyone got documentation from all workshops from the weekend as print-outs and on a USB stick. There were important people from the education authorities there. They also received the results and suggestions from the workshops.

It was great getting to know different people and their different opinions. It was an inspirational event.



**Alina Barth**, Student at the [Freie Schule Leipzig](#) (Germany)

## A teacher's report:

We - three students and two staff members from the Freie Schule Leipzig - set off for the conference Chemnitz 11 with no idea at all of what to expect. Would the workshops be optional? How would people respond when we presented the way our democratic school works?

In the morning 250(!) students gathered in a big circle and were briefly introduced to the open-space method. Most of the students and teachers from the public schools had never worked with open space before. The night before, I even heard one teaching asking: What will happen if the students don't take action or have any ideas for workshops?

The two ingenious moderators started to ask the students what they would like to change in their schools in order to get ideas for workshops, and the miracle started to happen: Very slowly the first people raised their hands stepped in the huge circle, took the

microphone and spoke out about the things she or he had been wanting to change. More and more kids raised their hands; everybody was clapping for each new idea about how to make their schools better! In the next 30 minutes 50 (in words: FIFTY!) workshop ideas were born and took place on the same day! The students discussed nearly everything about their schools, from hygiene to utopias, from federalism in the German educational system to the Greek origins of democracy and how it's misunderstood today! After that everyone met once again and shared their experiences.

Everything happened by free will, without rewards, marks or any kind of pressure!



**Benni Schmutzer**, Teacher at the [Freie Schule Leipzig](#) (Germany), Member of the EUDEC Council



# Fighting for Change in Berlin

## Popular Initiative "Schule in Freiheit"

### Using instruments of direct democracy to improve conditions for democratic schools.

Founding and operating democratic schools is a considerable challenge. Often this difficulty is a direct result of political framework conditions. So what makes more sense than to change these political framework conditions – and to change them using direct-democratic means?

The Berlin popular initiative "[Schule in Freiheit](http://www.schule-in-freiheit.de)" (literally "School in Freedom") is demonstrating how this can work. The group is fighting for greater diversity in the school system of Berlin. Its main demands are as follows:

1. Educational freedom – Schools should have the right to develop and define the content and quality standards of their work independently.
2. Equal financing – Neither publicly nor independently operated schools should charge tuition.
3. Independent organisation – All schools, if they choose, should have organisational independence to the greatest possible extent.



The popular initiative does not seek to compare or judge various educational concepts. Their goal is to increase educational freedom for all schools in Berlin – also for public schools. However, democratic schools would also profit from an implementation of these demands.

Between May and November 2010 the initiative collected more than 29,000 signatures, thereby earning the right to speak and make a proposal in the Berlin State Parliament. On

10 March 2011 a public hearing of the popular initiative was held in front of the Committee for Education, Youth and Family of the Berlin State Parliament. Five representatives of the initiative talked with the members of parliament about the demands of the popular initiative and answered their questions. The hearing attracted an extraordinarily large audience and was broadcasted in several assembly halls.

On 14 April the plenary assembly of the State Parliament will make a final decision about the proposal of the popular initiative. Although there is no guarantee that the politicians will accept the initiative's proposals, the group has succeeded in sending out a signal and stimulating public debate. All of Berlin's daily newspapers have published reports about the popular initiative. In the future it will be more difficult for politicians to impose their political agendas on the school system.

The use of direct democracy in the form of participatory methods (popular initiatives and referendums) make it possible to improve conditions for the founding of schools and the operation of existing schools. Democratic schools would also profit from these improvements. This could represent a new field of activity for EUDEC: the initiation and support of popular initiatives for improving the conditions for democratic schools!

Information on the Berlin popular initiative "Schule in Freiheit":

[www.schule-in-freiheit.de](http://www.schule-in-freiheit.de) (German)

Information on the organisation Omnibus for Direct Democracy in Germany:

<http://www.omnibus.org/english/information.html> (English)

Information on the German organisation Mehr Demokratie:

<http://www.mehr-demokratie.de/english.html> (English)



**Henning Graner**, "Schule in Freiheit" representative, co-founder and staff member of [Netzwerkschule](http://www.netzwerkschule.de), Berlin



# Regional Meetings in Spain and Italy

## Meeting of Free Education Groups and Schools, 26-27 February 2011, Madrid

By Josu Uztarroz



The meeting of free education groups and schools was initiated and organised by the schools Tximeleta (EUDEC member), *Ojo de Agua* (EUDEC member) and Alavida, which hosted the meeting. Twelve groups took part, and another 2 were represented through other groups. The most important groups in terms of size and experience with free education in Spain took part in the meeting, although the intention is to increase the number of groups and schools involved. The last meeting of free education groups in Spain took place 6 years ago in Barcelona. Since then, there has been no contact between them, apart from an attempt to launch a network called Amapola in 2007. Everyone was glad to have this new

opportunity to be in touch and to exchange experiences and impressions. In fact everyone had felt a great need to do something like this.

The main issues discussed at the meeting were:

- The situation of each group: both internally and legal status
- The creation of a network of free education groups
- The development of a communication tool between all of them
- The creation of a document that defines our guidelines and objectives
- Legality: current situation, perspectives and possibilities in the future
- The initiation of a line of communication with the foundation REDESLIFE, to establish links of collaboration between the foundation and free schooling
- Miscellaneous: exchanges, EUDEC etc.
- Future meetings, scheduled for June and/or October

A newsgroup has been launched to facilitate communication.



**Josu Uztarroz**, member/parent of [Tximeleta](#), a free-democratic school in Pamplona, Spain



<http://educaciondemocratica.wordpress.com>

## Meeting Planned for 15 May in Rome

By Irene Stella

The Italian network for libertarian education (REL) is a growing network of individuals and schools, dedicated to the promotion of democratic education in Italy. One of the main activities is to organize an annual meeting to promote the idea of libertarian and democratic education. Last year the meeting was held in Verona at the Kiskanu school and it was a real success with about 200 people attending the plenary session and the five workshops.

This year REL will hold the annual meeting on democratic and libertarian education in Rome on the 15th of May.



The program is not yet ready, but we already know that there will be some "special guests" from EUDEC: For example, Ute Siess from Freiburg will tell us about her amazing experience as a teacher coming from a normal school and then changing to the democratic school "Kapriole" (Freiburg, Germany).

For further and updated information please visit <http://www.educazionelibertaria.org/>.



**Irene Stella**, founder of [MUKTI](#), a democratic school-founding group in Italy



## Children's Rights Based Education

### A Review of Recent Research into Children's Rights Based Education in State Schools in Hampshire, England

By Derry Hannam

In 2002 one of the county education officials in Hampshire, England, learned of research carried out by researchers at Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia, Canada, into the effects of children's rights education which involved the consistent teaching and modelling in 'rights respecting classrooms' of what are generally referred to as the 'participation rights' set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC - [www.unicef.org/crc/](http://www.unicef.org/crc/)) (Covell & Howe, 1999; 2001; Covell, O'Leary & Howe, 2002; Howe & Covell, 1998). These early findings in Canada indicated that, compared with their peers, children who learn about their rights under the Convention, in a rights-consistent classroom, show 'increased levels of self-esteem, increased perceived peer and teacher support, a more adult-like understanding of rights and responsibilities, more supportive attitudes toward children of minority status, and more rights-respecting behaviours.' (Covell and Howe, 2007 and 2008 – available from [www3.hants.gov.uk/education/childrensrights/](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/education/childrensrights/))

In 2002 and 2003 administrators and a small group of interested infant, junior and primary head teachers from Hampshire County undertook study-leave in Cape Breton, Canada. Following these visits the Hampshire Education Authority's *Rights Respect and Responsibility* Initiative (RRR) was created. This involved a programme of whole school reform in some Hampshire schools which began with infant, junior and primary schools and later extended into a small number of secondary schools. The initiative, perhaps surprisingly, received the whole hearted support of key locally elected conservative party politicians and the current policy is that RRR

should eventually involve all the county's schools at all age levels.

The UN agency responsible for monitoring the implementation of the UNCRC by signatory states (which include all the UN member states except for the USA and Somalia) is UNICEF. In 2004 UNICEF UK created a two level national award which proved appropriate for validating the efforts of RRR schools in Hampshire and which encouraged the creation of similar programmes in several other cities and counties in England. This is known as the Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) details of which can be found at [www.unicef.org.uk/rrsa](http://www.unicef.org.uk/rrsa)

In 2005 the Cape Breton researchers, Covell and Howe, agreed with Hampshire staff that they would carry out a 3-year longitudinal study from 2005 to 2008 on the effect of the RRR programme in 16 infant, junior and primary schools, some of which they categorised as **fully implemented (FI)** schools and others as **less fully implemented (LFI)** schools (later changed to **PI** or **partially implemented**). They used a 1 to 8 scale for this school self evaluation with 1 representing 'not really started' and 8 indicating that children's rights were central to the overall functioning and ethos of the school, operationalised in every classroom and understood and supported by all staff. In 2005, at the start of the study, school ratings ranged from 3.0 to 7.9. By the end of the second year in 2007, 3 schools had dropped out, and of the survivors 4 had reached level 8, 4 had lower scores than at the start, and the other 5 had made some improvement, one very considerably (3.00 to 7.67) and one only very marginally (4.40 to 4.50). The researchers attributed the drop-out, the improvements and the declines entirely to the relative commitment, planning, leadership and enthusiasm, or lack of it, of the individual school head-teachers for the aims of the RRR project.



In 2006 a second study covering much of the same ground was initiated by UNICEF UK to evaluate the impact that their RRSA (Rights Respecting Schools Award) was having on participating schools. This was carried out by the Universities of Sussex and Brighton and resulted in a preliminary report in 2008 after one year of a 3-year longitudinal study and a final report in 2010 (Sebba and Robinson, 2008 and 2010 -

[www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Education-Documents/RRSA\\_Evaluation\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Education-Documents/RRSA_Evaluation_Summary.pdf)).

The study collected data from 12 schools in 5 local authority areas, including Hampshire where in one or two schools data was also being collected at the same time by Covell and Howe causing some confusion in these schools according to the Cape Breton researchers! Strangely Sebba and Robinson make no reference to the work of Covell and Howe in their reports though surely they must have known of it.

Covell and Howe's findings are certainly interesting for those trying to implement more democratic approaches in state (or in the US 'public') schools and school systems. There is no space here to detail all the findings or the methodologies of the two Covell and Howe reports so I will quote their summary -

*'...we can confidently say that where RRR has been fully implemented, teachers and pupils are showing many benefits. Teachers are feeling less stressed and enjoying their classes more, and are able to see the positive effects on their pupils of the work they are doing. Pupils are aware of their rights, they respect the rights of others, they feel respected, and their levels of participation and engagement in school have increased. Schools in which RRR has been fully implemented emanate an atmosphere of mutual respect and harmonious functioning. They are clearly, in the words of the overarching principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in "the child's best interests." (Covell and Howe, 2010)*

Significantly the authors noted a qualitative difference in the understanding of the programme between children in the fully implemented or progressing schools and those where the school RRR rating was static or declining. In the former schools children had an understanding that rights were inalienable but need to be accompanied with growing responsibilities and respect for the rights of others whereas in the latter schools children saw the programme as mainly to do with rules and obedience to those rules.

One of Covell and Howe's findings is of particular interest to me and supports one of the guiding hypotheses of the study that I conducted for the UK government in 2001 into 'more than usually participative schools', a concept that substantially overlaps with that of a 'rights respecting school.' (Hannam, 2001 -

[www.csveducation.org.uk/downloads/research-and-reports/Impact-of-Citizenship-Education-Report.pdf](http://www.csveducation.org.uk/downloads/research-and-reports/Impact-of-Citizenship-Education-Report.pdf) ) This involves

*'... the possibility that the positive effects of RRR are the most pronounced in the schools which are in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In such schools, absences and behavioural incidents have decreased markedly; and test scores, motivation, and self-regulation in learning and behaviour, and parental involvement have increased significantly. Pupils' behaviour, academic motivation, and achievement test scores have shown remarkable improvement. It would appear that the rights education program has altered the educational experiences, and in turn, the motivations and aspirations of the pupils.*

*Pupils living in adverse family circumstances, through RRR, are perhaps for the first time experiencing respect, success, and hope for their futures. In the words of one pupil, "It (RRR) gives you self-encouragement knowing that you have rights and someone cares about it." There is reason to believe that RRR may in fact function as a protective factor in promoting educational resilience among children living in adversity.'*

Sebba and Robinson's findings are similarly positive and a selection are set out below under the six headings required by the UNICEF UK commissioning brief which are themselves based on the six headings used for evaluating schools for the RRSA.

1. **Knowledge and understanding of the CRC.** This developed well in most, though not all, of the studied schools and gradually became a 'way of being' in some rather than a list of rights to be learned one by one. Responsibility developed parallel to the growing understanding of rights. Some schools had difficulty in taking along ancillary staff such as playground supervisors. As with Covell and Howe, Sebba and Robinson found the attitude and commitment of head teachers to be crucial to the successful implementation of the project.
2. **Relationships and behaviour.** The study schools reported improvements in relationships between students, between staff, and between students and staff. Where conflicts between students did occur students became more able to resolve these for themselves.
3. **Pupils feel empowered to respect the environment and rights of others locally, nationally and globally.** Awareness of international issues and campaigns grew though understanding of national and local issues was less well developed.
4. **Pupils demonstrate positive attitudes towards inclusivity and diversity within society.** Positive change in attitudes towards ethnic minorities and disabilities of all kinds was reported in all the study schools over the 3 years of the study.
5. **Pupils actively participate in decision-making within the school community.** Although there was progress on this issue within all the study

schools there were still examples of adults making decisions for students that they were perfectly capable of making for themselves. Much of the decision-making allowed to many school student representative bodies such as student councils was still restricted to issues such as toilet cleanliness rather than curriculum design or other core purposes of the schools, though there were examples where this was not the case. On the whole progress was better than the average for English schools as a whole reported in a major review of student involvement in school decision making in England carried out in 2007 by Whitty and Wisby (2007). (Whitty and Wisby's review is available on-line and makes reference to several studies in which I have been involved. I can provide copies to anyone interested.)

6. **Pupils show improved learning and standards.** Aside from begging the question of 'standards of what?' students and staff in the study schools reported that the rights respecting approach created a classroom climate that was 'more conducive to learning.' Scores on standardised tests improved in a majority of the study schools and exclusions and suspensions for anti-social behaviour declined in most during the 3 years of the study. There are always so many variables at work in educational research that causal connections can rarely be demonstrated but the associations are nonetheless interesting and match those in my own 2001 study. Also consistent with the findings of Covell and Howe and my own work was the finding that the shift to higher test scores and less anti-social behaviour appeared to be greatest in schools in poor socio-economic areas. '*RRSA may mediate the influence of poor socio-economic circumstances on outcomes.*'

Both studies presume that there are no ambiguities within the overriding requirement of the UNCRC that the 'best interests' of the child should always be the yardstick for its interpretation and implementation. Neither study explores the fundamental contradiction that I would certainly have felt as a child in a 'rights respecting' school between on the one hand my "...right...to education...compulsory and free to all" (article 28) if it was experienced as subjection to testing that damaged my self confidence and self-esteem, being grouped by 'ability' in a way that labelled me as 'bright and gifted' or 'being a slow learner', being coerced into lessons where I must 'attend' to a compulsory curriculum much of which I find to be uninteresting or irrelevant and on the other hand my participation rights set out in the Convention. Namely my "...right to express (my) views freely in all matters affecting the child...the views...being given due weight..." (article 12), my "right to freedom of expression...to seek, receive and impart information of all kinds..." (article 13), my "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion..." (article 14), my "right to freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly..." (article 15), my right not to be "...subjected to arbitrary interference with...privacy..." (article 16), and my right to be protected "...from all forms of physical or mental violence..." (article 19).

There are moves to introduce Matthew Lipmann's Philosophy for Children (P4C) programme into Hampshire schools. Perhaps this will provide the students and the teachers with the analytical and critical tools to make sense, or not, of these contradictions in the UNCRC and the RRR programme?

As a teacher in state schools for many years I see the RRR programme and the RRSA accreditation as steps towards a more humane school system. Educators in democratic schools might have other views of course.

## REFERENCES :

Covell, K. & Howe, R.B. (2005). *Rights, Respect and Responsibility. Report on the RRR Initiative to Hampshire County Education Authority*. Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Children's Rights Centre

Covell, K. & Howe, R.B. (2007). *Rights, Respect and Responsibility. Interim Report on the RRR Initiative to Hampshire County Education Authority*. Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Children's Rights Centre

Covell, K. & Howe, R.B. (2008). *Rights, Respect and Responsibility. Final Report on the RRR Initiative to Hampshire County Education Authority*. Nova Scotia: Cape Breton University Children's Rights Centre

Hannam, D. (2001) *A Pilot Study to Evaluate the Impact of the Student Participation Aspects of the Citizenship Order on Standards of Education in Secondary Schools*. London: CSV

Sebba, J., and Robinson, C. (2008). *Evaluation of UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Awards (RRSA) Scheme. Interim Report at the end of Year 1*. Brighton: Universities of Sussex and Brighton

Sebba, J., and Robinson, C. (2010). *Evaluation of UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Awards (RRSA) Scheme. Final Report*. Brighton: Universities of Sussex and Brighton

Whitty, G. And Wisby, E. (2007). *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action. DCSF Research Report RR001*. London:DCSF



**Derry Hannam**, Retired Headteacher, Inspector, Council of Europe Adviser, enthusiast for democratic education as democratic practice everywhere - including schools

## Education in Freedom

By Ola Matyska

Some reflections after a year of working with education in freedom:

The Island of Treasure (Wyspa pełna Skarbów) and its natural successor The Land of Treasure (Kraina pełna Skarbów) has been promoting and offering education in freedom since March 2009.

After observing and being with 2-5-year-old children on an everyday basis, I came up with a few questions about contemporary education.



1. Where does the idea come from that a child only becomes a fully accepted person after receiving compulsory education which is planned and organised by adults in a school-based system?

2. Why is so much said about people's rights, while compulsory education based on a planned, rigid curriculum is forced on children?

Children love learning. They want to do everything adults do, and do it as well as they can. They have an inner need to assert their own identity. Let's give them the right to do it, in the same way we give all adult people the right to be themselves and develop freely.

Children know what interests them. Let's not take away children's right to freedom, which means the right to choose to do what interests them. If children have to follow a curriculum someone else has constructed how will they ever discover what their talents are

and what they are interested in? Compulsion is discouraging.

The activities we offer in the Land of Treasure came about after observing children and talking to them. We are limited by our premises and occasionally by not having the people to run the activities the children suggest. The children who come to the Land of Treasure aren't forced to take part in any activities. They are encouraged to, but not forced. They are aware of their right to make independent decisions – and take advantage of it enthusiastically.

After a year in an atmosphere of freedom and respect for their individuality, they have become able to decide what they want to do. They have an astonishing ease in expressing their opinions. They ask lots of interesting, independent questions. They are creative. They aren't afraid to put their own ideas into practice. And each child is different. They learn that everyone has the right to be different.



*Marysia, 4 1/2*

*She knows that painting is the most important thing to her. She paints and draws every day. Occasionally with music on. She occasionally says the music distracts her. She knows a lot of words and can read many of them correctly. She doesn't have any problem with mathematical concepts. She loves taking part in activities leading to reading and writing. Not only enthusiastically, but effectively. She likes to use words which are sometimes difficult for adults. Her understanding of them is growing all the time.*

*She's recently begun playing "house", and most often plays the role of a child or a wife.*

*Patryk, 5*

*He's good at mechanical things. He's always "repairing" something. He loves watching films which involve tools, cars etc. Diggers and cranes fascinate him most of all. The other children looked on enviously as he "drove" a big yellow – and most importantly – real digger around the park with the driver. He loves to solve problems, especially technical ones. He made up the phrase, "Let's think how Pat and Mat would have done it".*

*He also loves cooking. He says he's going to be a brilliant cook.*

*He was the first to be able to use the computer. He rarely asks for help with the computer.*

*He recently decided it's worth learning to read and write.*

*Amelka, 4*

*Amazingly dynamic, brave and physically able. She learned to ride a bike without stabilizers at the age of 3 1/2. She likes doing what the other children are doing. Because of her, our children are often involved in physical activities, since she often initiates games involving movement.*

*She is always very focused when she does manual activities. She can model, stick and cut out for 2 hours without getting out of her chair.*

*She's got a very good musical ear. She learns songs quickly, and loves "organising shows". At the moment she doesn't say what she's going to be in the future.*

*Tybek, 3*

*He can easily be persuaded to join in activities. He's disciplined and very ambitious when he takes part in various activities. He started joining in in activities when he was 2. He has his own method of developing his speech. When he watches films, he often repeats the entire dialogue aloud. Recently the only toys he wants to play with are cars.*

*He often plays with building bricks, like Lego.*

*He teaches his younger friends how to build aeroplanes.*

*When he's not being successful with an activity, he gives it up. He occasionally re-*



*turns to it after some time. He did that with using a laptop without using a mouse.*

*Jaś, 3*

*He plays, sleeps and goes for walks holding a hammer, screwdriver, and occasionally a saw. Whenever it's time to watch a cartoon he always votes for Handy Manny.*

*He can be persuaded to paint.*

*Robert, 2 1/2*

*He only recently began to use words. For around 2 months he has been able to distinguish between English (his daddy's language) and Polish (his mummy's language). When his father is there he speaks to him in English, and then often repeats the same sentence to us in Polish. Considering his age it's an amazing ability. He loves to paint and cook. He likes group activities very much.*

*It's worth creating an individual learning*

programme for each child – with the child. “With the child” means allowing the child’s interests to play a part in creating the programme.



However, adult experts do not recognise the rights of children to unhindered personal development or to assert their identity. They consider learning should take place in a

large same-age group using a previously prepared standardised programme.

From adults, we demand independent thinking, a range of skills, and the ability to design their own development.

Wouldn't it be better simply to allow our children to take advantage of their right to freedom, which in this case means the right to choose to do what they consider interesting to them?

I answer that question with an absolutely definite “YES”.



**Ola Matyska**, founder and teacher, Land of Treasure nursery school, Poland

<http://www.krainapelnaskarbow.pl/>

### We need your feedback!

This was our longest newsletter thus far. There are always just so many interesting things happening. So much news to share.

Please let us know what you think. Would you prefer shorter newsletters (or longer)? More frequent (or less)? What kinds of things interest you most?

### Join EUDEC!

For just €3 a month (€1 for low-income countries), you can make a big difference.

EUDEC relies solely on membership fees for its programs.

And the more people EUDEC represents, the louder we can speak out for democratic education in Europe. [Join here](#).



EUDEC is a non-profit organisation that promotes democratic education in Europe.

EUDEC e.V.  
Paul-Gruner-Str. 33  
04107 Leipzig, Germany

Website: [www.eudec.org](http://www.eudec.org)  
E-mail: [info@eudec.org](mailto:info@eudec.org)