

The structure, atmosphere, and curriculum of first-year writing set the stage for beginning the conversations about writing across the curriculum. If FYW instructors embrace their roles as architects and consciously construct writing bridges between their classrooms and those outside, they will elevate the importance of the course. Most importantly, cross-curricular acknowledgment will reinforce writing as a crucial skill to master, and a fully-developed foundation will encourage students to build on their acquired knowledge, enhancing their writing skills across and through the college curriculum.

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### **In Conversation with...**

#### **Zoë Readhead, Principle of Summerhill School, Leiston, Suffolk.**

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As the UK battles with an ever-changing education landscape in which growth can be seen in the introduction of academies, trust schools, federations, chains of schools and 'free schools', I talk to Zoë Readhead, Principal of what is often called the first democratic, self-governing 'free' school. Whilst the term 'free school' today implies a model that is 'state-funded... set up in response to what people say they want and need in their community to improve education for local children' (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/opening-a-free-school#free-school->

model-funding-agreements), Summerhill is grounded on Alexander Neill's principle of 'freedom not licence'. This principle extends beyond a notion of self-governance, to that in which the community is wholly democratic, where children learn to be self-confident, tolerant and considerate and are given the space to be themselves (<http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/an-overview.php>).

Not government-funded, Summerhill is an Independent British boarding school founded in 1921 by Alexander Neill. It is run as a charitable trust, is fee paying, relying on donations in order to provide bursaries or other forms of financial assistance to pupils (<http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/as-neill-summerhill-trust.php>). It is probably the first educational institution to embed the core values of self-government and freedom that are implied by the 'free school' movement in the UK today. In conversation with Zoë, I discover more about the driving force of this pioneering school and the philosophy that underpins its ethos.

Originally part of an International School called Neue Schule in Hellerau (a suburb of Dresden), Neill moved the school to Lyme Regis in the south of England in 1923 to a house called Summerhill. The school continued there until 1927 when it moved to its present location in the village of Leiston in Suffolk, taking with it the name of Summerhill. (Further information is available at: <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/history.php>).

I met Zoë (who is the current Principal and daughter of Neill) in a small room off Reception, which is the first building visitors see before catching a glimpse of the more imposing main house that is the hub of the school. At first glance it is clear that Summerhill is not a wealthy school, despite being in the independent sector, and as Zoë herself admits:

*'We are always short of money [but] a lot of old fashioned common-sense things come to mind; there is no use worrying about it. We have to some degree lost the need to simply just 'get on and do' stuff. People think it is very British, to make do and mend but it isn't anything to do with being British... Here at Summerhill it's always been a school with no money, it's never been a wealthy school and still now, although we have accrued a small community fund, everybody knows this is not a wealthy school... [for example] we haven't got a sports hall, we have to make do and mend but I think that's part of a really healthy process 2 – we just have to get on with it.'*

As I discovered through our conversation, the practical grounded philosophy that defines Zoë, underpins the ethos and spirit of the school; the emphasis is always on the practical, dealing with situations or issues as they arise, not worrying or fretting over the problem:

*'Everybody is so busy analysing things... you kind of lose sight of the big picture and don't get on with the 'doing'. So for me I think my Summerhill upbringing was responsible for the fact that I am a very practical grounded person; of course I think about things but I don't constantly ask questions – there is nothing to be gained by constantly questioning, wondering whether things are right and wondering why you*

*did that – it doesn't achieve anything but it does often confuse you and can make you very unhappy because you feel that you are failing. I think my Summerhill upbringing has made me an eternal optimist.'*

So life began for Zoë in the main house. She was born in the school, and from day one Summerhill was the centre of her universe. She recalls how a former member of staff wrote to her to say he was the first person to hear her cry! She lived and grew up in the school which was then managed by her father and subsequently on his death in 1973, by her mother; so taking over the reins on her mother's retirement in 1985 was an inevitability:

*'I have been part of the school all of my life; until I was three we lived in the main building and then moved to the lodge house. We had a family life during the holidays but during term time as a small child I ate meals with the children. We had a separate area where we slept but we didn't have a separate family life. I think the ethos of the school, the whole Summerhill philosophy, has profoundly affected my life (it is what defines me) and that of my children too. Summerhill is a philosophy for life, it is not just about education, it is about who you are and through Summerhill I am who I am ... it's not created me as such because I do not like to think anything or anyone is 'created' but it has allowed me to be who I am and it has really defined who I am through every single muscle and sinew in my whole body.'*

Growing up immersed in the philosophy that is Summerhill, Zoë acknowledged that was why they prefer to take children from a young age:

*'We don't take children over 12 normally. We do make some exceptions, but it's rare. Generally speaking Summerhill is a process and the earlier you get here the easier it is to go through that process, so when children have started when they are 5 or 6 they don't even need to think about right and wrong, it just becomes a natural part of their lives, but when you get a child of 14 they bring with them a lot of baggage and they need to kind of go through a process of "Yipeee, 'free' school, don't have to go to lessons", and then perhaps kicking back at the community and being a bit anti-social because that's what you do, you have a bit of rebelliousness. Then, when you kind of get it out of your system and work through it, you come round to thinking 'Well, I have got a life to lead and perhaps I need to be thinking about my future and probably going to some classes and things.' But if they come at 14 there isn't much time. Also they are much more influential; they can bring their baggage into the school and in a way kind of taint people who are unbagged. It really is not something that works very well. The ethos of democratic and practical living becomes a way of thinking and breathing. We don't teach it.'*

I was keen to know if Zoë felt a sense of responsibility to her father and mother to continue the legacy established by her father. When you look back to historical examples of siblings that have followed in their parents' footsteps, I have always felt there must be a sense of destiny or at least... of carrying on the cause. However, it was clear that Zoë did not see her destiny as one of carrying on the family business. Her

driving force is not grounded in some philosophical crusade to keep alive her father's dream. It is much more practical and down to earth. It is all about Summerhill:

*'My mum was running the school when my father died. She was getting on and we were thinking about what would happen when she could no longer carry on ... I had my own children by that time, they were coming to Summerhill and it was just obvious; my Mum was going to retire so what would happen? Well, my husband and I would take over; there wasn't a question. It is not about my dad or his legacy or anything like that, it's about Summerhill, it is too precious a place to let go. Currently I know my own children all feel the same. I have four children, Will is my Vice-Principal, Henry is apprenticing and has sort of made a life decision that he's got to be involved and he doesn't want to leave it all to his other brother. My daughter Amy runs the farm with my husband but she also does health and safety issues, and my other son Neill is a farmer but he just loves the school to bits - he does a lot of tree cutting & things here. So everybody is a bit involved. It is important it is maintained by people who really understand it and you understand it best when you've had it from your infancy, which I have and which my children have, so we are the obvious people to do it because we have kind of absorbed it through our skin.'*

There is an inference here, and the press have made much of the suggestion, that Summerhill is not reflective of 'real' life and therefore is not preparation for the real world into which young people will eventually move. However, this is robustly rejected:

*'We are a kind of microcosm of life. We are a group of about 100 people and all that happens in the outside world also happens here but when there are issues or problems we deal with them in our school meetings.'*

The school meeting is central to the democratic process and freedom is seen therefore as fundamental to learning the life skills that are developed through participating in the school meetings. Here everyone learns to respect each other, to work together and above all to take responsibility for their actions:

*'I remember some years ago there were a couple of Japanese girls here; they were about 13 or 14 and they were brought up in the school meeting for making a noise after bedtime. One of the girls said that her friend was really depressed and wanted to talk; she was feeling really unhappy. But the community meeting basically said 'well that's too bad ... rules are rules... you've got a bedtime.. you have to stick to it' - what that said to me was how practical the society is here; it is really helpful not to go into that space of trying to analyse everything.'*

However, such a philosophy is not unique. Similarities can be drawn with the qualities and characteristics that are grounded in the very nature of tribalism. Zoë acknowledges that:

*'...tribes have been doing this for millions and millions of years. They have found different ways of doing it which may have become distorted in some areas, but*

*basically the kids have the freedom to do what they want to do. When you are out there in a tribe trying to carry on with your life, the children gradually pick up life skills by getting involved in general chores but most of the time they just play (no one is trying to sit them down in a school!) and that is what happens here, they play and as they get older they get more involved in what you might call chores, becoming bed-time officers, joining committees and things like that.'*

It has long been said that humans are social animals and do not function well on their own, so the notion of community living and having commitment to a group can be seen as an environment in which positive interaction and a sense of unity and identity can be fostered. Conversely, if the sense of democracy is about relying on the ability of the 'tribe' to organise and manage the problems of the community within the collective arena of the 'meeting', it could also be argued that tension could arise when evolution increases the size and scale of the 'tribe'. Currently (April 2014) Summerhill has 68 children. In previous years this has risen to 94 but physically puts pressure on space and resources. They are often asked if the democratic approach could function on a larger scale; conflict and tensions in an egalitarian community can arise simply when numbers increase, resulting in a less personal, individual participation in the collective decision-making process; however, space rather than the school's democratic approach is seen by Zoë as the limiter:

*'It could work on a bigger scale... if you have something that works you can make it work if you are imaginative, creative and down to earth; you get on with it, but I think that for us probably about 85 would be our maximum probably because we just haven't got enough space.'*

The outcomes however that such a community can generate can be powerful:

*'Many who leave here, when they mix with others at college, will often find they end up being the wise person in the group; they are the one that people turn to because they have the people skills – they can deal with people – [they have] a kind of steadiness, a calmness.'*

These qualities also define Zoë as a person:

*'I wouldn't say I am always calm and I wouldn't say I am always relaxed, but on the whole when I look at the way the world is out there, I think that I am really calm; you do stress about stuff and of course things stress you and upset you but you just have to roll up your sleeves and deal with it and you have to be prepared to put it to bed... I think one of the things that I found very profound was that probably about 20 years ago I had a very nice young horse, she was out in the field and I was going to get her in to put her into the stable. I had had a busy day, it was very dark, windy and raining. I opened the gate and led her out and as I did so the gate swung shut, she stepped sideways and tore open her right side down to her ribs. We dealt with it, the vet came and she was sewn up, but for me I knew it was my fault, I just thought silly, silly cow you were in a hurry and although I am not saying I could have avoided it, but I wouldn't have let the gate swing back if I wasn't in such a hurry. All the time as she was going*

*through the treatment I just kept thinking it was my fault, my fault but at the end of the day you just have to step away, you can't go on punishing yourself.*

*'We had a staff member here some time ago who had a real problem, he had made a big mistake in his life, and was racked with guilt and I found myself telling him the story of the horse. You know there are always times in our lives when we think, "NO, I didn't do that did I?" But you have to let it go, it's in the past, you can't keep looking back... it is the reality. And in a way modern society doesn't... I'm not saying people shouldn't have counselling but at the same time there is almost an inherent morbid need for people to keep on going back. You have just got to let it go otherwise it ruins your life... you've just got to say I screwed up... you've got to deal with it yourself and I think that is something that we learn here. It is very important you learn to take responsibility for your actions. It's a huge problem in the outside world. It's all about somebody else's fault. People first and foremost need to be responsible for their actions, they need to make decisions knowing that they will be responsible for the decision they have made and not blaming it on somebody else.'*

However, Zoë acknowledges that Summerhill has had to accept the way the world views the school is not always positive or supportive of its underlying values and principles:

*'As the hysteria of life out there changes, we have to be aware of what is the big shocking thing of the moment. For example, we have so many health and safety issues. Our job is now very much to accommodate all the requirements without allowing it to affect the community. We've got a staff handbook that's this thick and have policies coming out of our ears. My dad wouldn't know what a school policy was! So that sort of thing has changed very dramatically but I think we do a very good job of trying to preserve the philosophy of the school keeping within the guidelines.'*

Following a recent inspection, Summerhill was rated as Good by Ofsted but was told that they in fact could be Outstanding if they complied with the regulation of tracking children's progress through the school. In this respect Zoë is resigned to remaining at Good as she is adamant that such a process would impact on the school as a community:

*'This is a family environment, you cannot be consistently tracking your siblings, you can't be tracking your co-workers in that way, it just wouldn't work and we won't do that here.'*

It was not the first disagreement the school has had with government offices. In March 2000, after a damning report from an Ofsted inspection in March 1999 in which changes were demanded that would seriously impact on the Summerhill philosophy, the school won an historic legal battle against the DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) in which it defended, at an Independent Schools Tribunal, the rights and voices of its children:

*'There were certain things that we were taken to court for in the year 2000 because we*

*had just said no. But there are a lot of other things, I think more to do with litigation, that are frightening and you do have to be very mindful of them. We have to be inspected by somebody; our lawyer has recommended that we try and use a special private school body but to do that would cost several thousands of pounds a year and we haven't got that kind of money. I feel we know what they (Ofsted) want and we liaise with the inspectors and make sure that they take the views of the school meetings into account.'*

Zoë touches here on an interesting point of reference for our current changing educational landscape. It is clear from her comments that she supports the need for accountability – albeit the school is in the private sector. Set this alongside the current dismantling, marginalisation and reworking of local authorities and their reorientation from service provider to commissioner, it could be argued that a new kind of relationship is needed between the education policy-making processes of government and the new kind of educational provider that is emerging. The perceived newfound 'freedom' that some schools and school partnerships are opting for raises questions around our understanding of what is meant by 'accountability' – accountable to whom, and whose values underpin the accountability process? Interestingly, this emerging new landscape has the potential to change original concepts of 'leadership, 'ownership' and indeed the 'financial structure' of schools, all of which will be highly interrelated (Ball, 2011). **(Editor: Your comments and views are welcome on Twitter: @jpduob)**

Lessons at Summerhill are run pretty much the same as any other school – they employ teachers, they have a timetable, have a lower and upper school. The older children sign up for classes at the beginning of term and the timetable is put together once they know who has signed up for what; the big difference of course is that it is not compulsory to sign up for or attend anything:

*'They do what they like – if they want to go they go, if they don't want to go they don't. We don't do A levels, so they would have to go onto college [for that] anyway but the majority of our pupils take GCSEs and the majority do go onto college. You get an occasional one who doesn't want to do that and I think we perhaps have a much more realistic view here or at least what I would call a more realistic view (University people might not call it realistic!)... University is not the be all and end all of everything. There are as many people standing in the dole queue that have university degrees as there are who haven't. It is a means to an end. If that is what you want to do and it floats your boat then you should get on and do it, but you shouldn't get on the escalator and go along because that's what everybody does. I had quite a surprising conversation with a child a few weeks ago. He is now 14 and was clearly anxious about his classes and was not really going. I said, "Just because everyone else is doing it you don't have to, there are lots of other things you can do." If all else fails you can just go out and get a job – it might not be a very good job but you can discover from there where you might want to go: you could just stack supermarket shelves if that's what you want... there is no pressure. He looked at me in horror and said, 'Oh... I didn't know that!' They need to know that you don't have to do what everybody else is doing, there are always other things to do. Fortunately too one of the staff [who was around at the time] said,*

*'I dropped out of school, worked as a waiter for 7 years and now I'm doing my third degree!' and he's only in his twenties.*

*They shouldn't be hurried, we all develop in different ways and I like to think that we touch on lots of things that we enjoy; so when I say that we are more realistic I think it is in that sense. In fact, I don't even think we do enough, we should do more – we have talks about careers and things and the older children have a careers advisor but I think in a way we should perhaps do more..... I think just because of our general attitude towards learning it becomes apparent to the kids that knowledge in your head isn't what life is all about unless that is what you want, and so I think everyone here realises that the most important thing eventually is who you are and how you feel about life. And feeling comfortable with who you are. They won't always get that while they are here because they are still very young, but by the time they are in their 20s they will realise that was what Summerhill was all about.*

Zoë sees the future challenges for Summerhill as just 'keeping their heads down' and getting on with the job. They would like more publicity because she believes there is a powerful message that Summerhill has to offer the world, education in particular and also the work place:

*'We had an ex-student who did her PhD on Summerhill and with a friend took the whole democratic Summerhill process into a doctor's surgery where they worked. They were able to profoundly change the working environment by the doctors, receptionists and everyone meeting once a week and having a discussion where they all felt equal. That was remarkable.'*

But Zoë has much pressure on her time, effectively playing a dual role as the school manager and the Principal and has to balance promoting the Summerhill approach with her day job of running the school. They are often misquoted or misrepresented in the press and Zoë feels publicity can be a double-edged sword. Every term she is usually bombarded by television companies wanting to do a programme on the school but this is seen as exploitive, turning their pupils into 'mini stars' for a day which is not conducive to family or community life, even though they have an important message to get out there:

*'Actually, my son Will who is the Vice-Principle, he is a very keen film maker and I am thinking that we could actually make our own [film] and he has come up with a title for it too: Understanding Summerhill – 100 Years of Controversy... Making our own film which would not be a fly on the wall because we know it so well, you could re-create situations by just going to a batch of 11 year-olds and saying, "Right, discuss an ombudsman case" and they could do it just like that because it is their life. So you could film things that were not real in order to explain to the world about Summerhill.'*

Staffing levels can be transient; although there are members of staff who have been with the school for many years, most usually stay for three or four years. It is a very 'in your face' place to live, and although you do not have to be single, given that staff in reality live a single life style, it makes holding down a relationship difficult:

*'When you first arrive you get a single room on the top corridor amongst the 11 and 12 year- olds; you use the same bathroom they use. They are a noisy lot so you have to fight your corner. If they keep you awake at night you would need to bring it up in the school meeting and in a way we keep it like that because it's a bit of an initiation by fire. When you have been here a while and as caravans become vacant you would be moved out but that's where you go when you first come. In a way I think that it's really good to have a change of staff and they are always really exciting people; people are here because they want to be and experience life and Summerhill. We try to make sure that the people we employ do understand the reality of it and haven't just read Neill's book and think they know it all, because they are just a pain to be honest. You want people who are willing to learn about the reality of it. And you know it is quite difficult because we are really employing two people – we need the person who is going to do the job well and we need a nice person who is going to fit into the community and be part of the community. But we get a lot of enthusiasm and we have always managed to fill the posts. At the moment we are advertising for an English teacher.*

At the top of Zoë 's wish list is a limitless bursary fund – not to improve the school, because she actually quite likes that it is a 'bit hard up', but because, relative to other school staff, pay is poor; albeit that teachers live in and do not have living expenses, she would like to pay them more. But perhaps even more important are the parents who want to send their children to the school but despite the relatively low fees, simply cannot afford to. These are often the parents and children who have especially chosen Summerhill for its philosophy rather than seeing it as a last resort for problem children. They are the families that she would most like to be able to support.

*'My father published children's stories and created this person call Pyecraft. He was this big fat American who had a big fat cigar in his mouth and was a multi-millionaire. We could do with a Pyecraft at Summerhill!'*

However, my impression of Summerhill and its tenacious and caring Principal is far removed from the fairy story image - its principles are grounded in basic humanity and as Zoë herself would say, in good old fashioned common-sense.

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*Further details about Summerhill, its current activities, philosophy and history can be found on their website at: <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/>*

*Comments welcome on Twitter: @jpduob*