

“Introducing Self-Directed Learning and Democracy in schools”
Text of Derry Hannam’s Talk at the Child Friendly Community conference,
Ottawa. 21st November 2020

My name is Derry Hannam. For thirty years I was a teacher and school inspector in England, and then worked with the Council of Europe and the UK government on Citizenship and human rights education (EDC/HRE). I met some great North American educators - Judith Torney-Purhta, Carol Hahn, Jim Youniss, Shelley Billig, Rick Batistioni from the US and Will Kymlicka from Canada – and read the work of Ottawa’s own Joel Westheimer of “Westheimer and Kahne” inc. (My spies tell me he is here at this conference!) It confirmed my belief that if you want young people to understand democracy they have to ‘do it’ in the everyday life of the school and not just listen to teachers talk about it. In 2001 We were able to get ‘participation in democratic decision making and responsible action’ onto the high school curriculum in England until it was replaced by another government with “British Values.” I did some work that showed that genuinely student participative schools with effective student councils with budgets and regular time-tabled meetings were associated with fewer exclusions, better test scores and better attendance than authoritarian schools in similar socio-economic environments.

I have visited many democratic schools such as Sudbury Valley and Yaacov’s Hadera school asking what can our public school systems learn from them. I regard them as ‘pioneers of possibility.’ They show what can be done.

Our state school system in England is not a happy place right now. It is preoccupied with financial cuts, test scores, ever more prescriptive curriculum, authoritarian and hierarchical structures, behaviour management, isolation rooms, exclusions, inspections, league tables, with high levels of mental illness in young people. Research shows that we have the unhappiest young people in Europe. We are even testing 4 year-olds against the wishes of their teachers even though we know the predictive value is roughly zero –though putting a young child on the ‘slow’ table will affect their self-esteem and inhibit future learning. Sadly we have forgotten that we are signatories of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – not least article 12!!

Young people missed their friends during the pandemic lockdown – but many did not miss lessons where they have no choice, no control or no consent in their learning. Where coercion is the norm.

This talk is about the implementation of two Guiding Principles in my work, initially with younger secondary students aged 11-13 and then 11-18.

The First Principle - Students should participate in decisions about their own learning, real Self Directed and Self-Exploring learning around the interests and purposes of the children themselves. I share Jerome Bruner's 3 'c's view of childhood – that children are naturally CURIOUS and COLLABORATIVE, and like to feel COMPETENT – adding with the late Ken Robinson naturally CREATIVE. These qualities of childhood match Peter Gray's "Educational Instincts" of Curiosity, Sociability, Planfulness and above all Playfulness – For me PLAY and CREATIVITY are closely linked – maybe they are the same thing.

The Second Principle - Student participation in meaningful democratic decision making in the everyday life of the class and the school, - the creation of a human rights respecting democratic context for the learning. This is in itself a major source of learning about who you are as a person, about democracy and about citizenship. It involves creating non-coercive spaces within our compulsory school systems - "pockets of democracy" where children of whatever age are treated with respect and capable of making many decisions for themselves and with each other.

Recent lockdown experience in England where primary schools had too few children for age based classes and were unable to use the formal curriculum, found that mixed age play with minimal teacher intervention has been wonderful to watch – often the younger children seem to take the lead. Peter Gray is finding the same in his "Play Club" research in US elementary schools.

When I was at school learning about democracy and human rights was like reading holiday brochures in prison – not much point unless you about to be released or escape!

My primary school was not interested in what I was interested in. It Just made me feel anxious and 'no good' at things.

In secondary school I was top of the class in the first year and bottom in the second. Nobody bothered to ask why. I was just told that I needed to pay more attention in lessons and stop dreaming my own thoughts – like "how the hell do I get out of here?" I left school at the earliest possible age. My best learning memory is of learning to sail with our church which my mum cleaned and I got

a free place on the priest's sailing trips. Every Easter he rented a fleet of 5 berth sailing boats. Each trip you moved up the chain of command – so by the time I was fourteen I was a skipper of a crew of mixed ages some older than me. It was authority based on competence. I liked that.

Year later as an English school inspector visiting Sudbury Valley School I found something similar. **It is a private democratic school in Massachusetts of 200 students aged 4 to 19 with a student negotiated curriculum.** I was shown around the school by a twelve year old boy. I asked to see the music room where I started to play a tune on the lovely grand piano. "Satin Doll" by Duke Ellington.

"Oh Derry If you do that I will have to bring you up to the JC!!"

"What's that?" – I asked – feeling very guilty.

"It's the Judicial Committee - you need to be certified to play the school instruments,"

"OK how do I get certified?" (You have to remember that in the UK being certified means you are about to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital!!)

"You have to be certified by a member of the music corporation."

"What is the music corporation?" I asked.

"Ah – it's all the students and staff who understand how to take care of musical instruments."

"OK – who is a member of the music corporation?" I asked.

"Weeeeell I am. I play the violin,"

"Great. Will you certify me please. What do I have to do?"

"Oh, play me something you love."

I played Satin Doll – again - but this time without interruption.

"My that's pretty" he said. "You're certified" and wrote my name on a list on the wall.

I love telling this story at official conferences in England. It says so much about respect for young people's knowledge, autonomy and competence in a structure that genuinely shares power and authority in the school community.

During Teacher training I found books by AS Neill, Homer Lane, John Dewey. WOW – the world lit up. At Summerhill I read that children could choose what they wanted to learn while sharing in the democratic management of the school community. I wanted to try it out in a state school.

I didn't know if it could be done – but I thought it was worth a try.

At my first teaching practice I got in early on the first day and arranged the chairs in a circle. The kids arrived and were puzzled when I sat in the circle. I explained that they could either create projects on anything they liked—individually or in groups – or do work-sheets that I had prepared. I just asked that they would present their projects to the rest of the class at the end of my stay . We started every day with a class meeting and make decisions by voting. It was a great success, parents got involved, the head was delighted and I got A+ for my Teaching Practice!! ...and Nobody chose to do my worksheets!!

My next Teaching Practice was in an authoritarian secondary school. It was a disaster.

For my final Teaching Practice the class teacher was an ex-army officer. When I said that I wanted to create a democratic class meeting and get the 10 year old kids creating their own projects instead of saying 'over my dead body' he said "Fantastic – I've always wanted to try something like that." We worked together brilliantly. Parents became involved and we ended with a class festival. The head teacher was pleased and I got another A.

For the final year I moved into Oxford University. Academically it was amazing. You had choice and control over your own learning. If you handed in your essay each week you could go to any lectures in any subject that interested you. Recent research shows a close correlation between autonomy and happiness and I was a happy learner at last – though not so happy about the English class system.

My first job was as a humanities teacher in a secondary modern school to teach English, History, Geography, Soc studies and Religious Education to one

class of 34 11 year olds for 60% of the week. These children had failed a high-stakes test at 11 called the 11+. Few went to University from this kind of school. The principal wanted some integration of subjects though the heads of subject departments were against it. So I joined a team of seven with scheduled planning time and I was given my own large classroom.

This gave me the three T's that I think are important for class democracy. TIME – for lots of talk, for a class meeting, for students to become absorbed in what they were doing without bells ringing and moving to other rooms, for student presentations etc. TEAM – not to be on your own – with planning time to share ideas. TERRITORY – to have a dedicated space, with display and storage. So that was a good start.

On the first day I arranged the chairs in a circle and sat in the circle myself. The children arrived and sat in the circle. I told them my name – first and family – and said that in our classroom I was Derry but anywhere else it would have to be Mr Hannam. I explained the five subjects – history - the past, geography - other parts of the world, social studies - how people live in communities, religious knowledge - what people believe, and English - how people communicate. A boy said 'that sounds like everything in the whole world. Can we learn about anything in the world?' Good start.

Several people wanted to speak at once so I got a book off my desk and said 'I propose that you should only speak when you are holding the book and then pass it to someone else. Who agrees? Who disagrees?' Hands went up. So we were voting already and making class rules. Every night I made notes of how the class democracy evolved - with its class meeting, class laws which I explained could not break the laws of England or the rules of the school, class court (very similar to the Judicial Committee in a Sudbury Valley school) – which became necessary when the growing number of class laws were broken, class clubs, a class newspaper, and the many many student directed projects. Many jobs were created – everyone did something – often several different jobs. The popular jobs, such as editor of the class newspaper, or chair of the class meeting, class secretary or, class treasurer, were elected and all had deputies. The secretary minuted all class meetings and decisions of the class court. Everyone experienced chairing meetings. Everyone learned to speak in meetings. They even created a class tax system of 1p a week to buy games for the class.

I ignored most of the prescribed subject curriculum. The students chose their own projects. Preferably in groups but on their own if necessary. I suggested a Plan, Do, Review process as a model but did not make a big thing about it as I was too aware of the role of serendipity in my own learning. The kids were more concerned about a perfect finished product than I was. I adopted what you might call a Socratic approach asking many questions to deepen their thinking but never telling them what to do – just assisting when invited. They decided when a project was finished – or when it should be abandoned though this was quite rare. We agreed that everyone would share their projects with the rest of the class even if they had not been totally successful - sometimes as a presentation or sometimes in the class newspaper which had an elected editor and many sub-editors for different columns such as sport, music, pets, fashion or model railways. The newspaper gradually covered all the walls and the door. Projects were never graded for their finished product though we used to evaluate effort and process together which I would record as I had to report to parents and at least appear to be following the school's assessment policy.

Short story writing and poetry became very popular. The art and drama teachers became very supportive and used the ideas in their lessons. Artwork illustrated the poetry anthologies that the class produced and sold to parents.

Years later I was persuaded by Alfie Kohn to write a book about the class and an extraordinary thing happened. A 60 year-old bald headed man who I sort of recognised appeared on my Facebook. "I'm Andrew from your class 1H and I read an article by you in the Teachers newspaper. I see you are still at it."

It was an amazing piece of synchronicity because I was just writing about an incident involving him! One day the head teacher had come to my classroom with some visitors and I wasn't there - but the kids were all working quietly. I was in the library helping somebody find a book. The visitors were puzzled that the room was quiet without a teacher. The now bald-headed Andrew was class chairperson at the time. He explained that they were having a 'quiet time.' The class had a law that if 5 people found it too noisy they would put their hands up and the timekeeper would announce '5 minutes quiet.' If anyone spoke during a quiet time their names were noted – 5 notations in a week and they would have to appear before the class court. Andrew told the visitors 'our teacher is a bit soft and if we didn't have our class government it would be chaos in here.' The head told me this with a chuckle while reprimanding me

for leaving my class unsupervised. I said 'they were supervised – they were supervising themselves.'

Years later Andrew became principal of a primary school which he ran democratically. He was still in touch with others from the class – all in their late fifties and we met up. Some have written pieces in the book saying that their lives owed something to their two years in the democratic class. They had recovered their confidence as learners after the dreadful 11+ failure experience.

Instead of getting fired by the end of the year the other parallel classes were also adopting democratic practices – class meetings, class rules, class court, class clubs, class fund, class newspapers etc (much to the annoyance of my class who thought they had invented it all!!) The head decided to take the humanities experiment into the 2nd Year and I was put in charge of the team. 7 teachers and 220 kids for 60% of the school week. He was either brave or crazy – maybe both!!

We adopted democracy and student directed learning across the whole year group. We created a second year students' parliament that became a school council. We hooked up with the drama and art departments. We produced plays, poetry anthologies, exhibitions for parents. Kids could move from teacher to teacher as all classes were timetabled at the same time in adjacent classrooms. We used the school hall and teachers from other departments, parents etc would give talks to whoever wanted to attend. Kids could go to presentations by kids in other classes if the topic interested them. Presentations happened when students were ready...and kids went to the toilet when they needed to just telling a teacher where they were going (how extraordinary that I should even mention that!)

Sometimes my class gave lectures at the local teacher's colleges about class democracy. That was really nice. Presentations were planned in detail. I was instructed by the class meeting to explain how it worked "to get the attention of the audience." Then everyone in the class who had some responsible job, which was just about everyone, would talk about what they did. The student teachers didn't want to listen to me but they certainly wanted to listen to the kids. It was great. We never had any difficulty in filling the time. 12 year-olds taught the teachers.

We were written up in the Sun – a national tabloid newspaper owned by the Murdochs. One of the mothers had a brother who was a reporter. She told him about her daughter's democratic class and how much she was learning as editor of the class newspaper. He wanted to visit the class with a photographer. The kids were wildly enthusiastic. I forgot to tell the head teacher and ask his permission. In life I have learned that it is often easier to do things and apologise afterwards rather than ask permission before hand.

A boy called Ian who was not usually anti-social started to break all the class laws. The newspapermen arrived and sat in the meeting. There were many questions from editors of columns in the class newspaper about 'what's it like working on a real newspaper.' Then came the class court with Ian in the dock as the only offender. Sally was the chief magistrate/judge with a big hammer to call the court to order - David and Peter were her assistants. The photographer got his camera out. I realised then that Ian had worked out that the best way to get his picture in the paper was to get himself tried in the court. It worked. The paper paid for a bus to take us all to London to meet the editor and be presented with the first 34 copies, signed by him, as they rolled off the press with our story in it. I was pretty nervous – but in fact the story was very friendly and supportive of democracy in schools as education for citizenship – and there was a large picture of Ian and the class judges with me at the back with my hand up asking for permission to speak. The Head teacher was annoyed that I had not asked for his consent – but the parents loved it and told him so.

These kids were turning on to learning including how to manage a justice and rights respecting democratic community. Kohlberg and Gilligan were writing about moral development at this time based on the work of Piaget.

In the second year we admitted a very troubled girl from a Romany family. She had been bullied and victimised in her previous schools and had become an aggressive bully herself. We put her into my class as I thought they might be strong enough to control her behaviour and even help her. She made friends with some much older students in the school and began to bully and steal – but never from anyone in our class as she was cautious of the laws and the class court. Eventually the head teacher decided that she would have to be permanently excluded as parents began to complain. My class found out about this and one day walking back to our classroom I met some students who said "we are having a class meeting after school to discuss what we can do to help Jo. You can come too if you like." I loved that – I was their teacher and they

were telling me I can come to a class meeting they have called if I want to! There was a long discussion. One boy said “we should be nice to her some days and nasty – like not talk to her – on other days – to see what works.” That was rejected. Eventually they decided that they would do the kindest thing they could think of. The class captain resigned and so did the chief judge from the class court and Jo was elected in her absence to both jobs – the most important in the class in the view of the kids. The chief judge, Sally, said that if Jo became a judge she would realise what effect anti-social behaviour had on other people. The next morning when she arrived a special class meeting was called. Jo was told that she had been unanimously elected to both jobs. She burst into tears and ran from the room. When she returned she told everyone “Nobody has ever been kind to me in school before.” Her bullying and stealing stopped and the Head teacher was persuaded not to exclude her.

The young people in the class had developed a mature and moral concern for each other through having real power and real responsibility. Through sharing responsibility and having the freedom to make real choices they had become responsible. They could never have grown in this way if they had just been told what to do all the time.

Parents were overwhelmingly supportive during those two years. They were thrilled to see the confidence returning to their children after the blow of 11+ failure . This of course kept the head happy.

Gradually democratic methods spread through the whole school.

I moved to another school after 2 years. Here we had a special building where we could have 200 students at one time for 25% of the curriculum with a team of ten teachers. After 3 years I moved again to become vice-principal of a community secondary school experimenting with mixed age classes and including adults.

But always with the two guiding principles – as much Self Directed Learning as possible in a Democratic and Rights respecting context.

My ten years as an inspector were not so interesting – except that I was able to support Summerhill School when the government tried to close it.

I suppose you could say I was lucky. In England too many young teachers enter the profession full of idealism but become depressed by the end of their first

year. 50% of teachers want to leave within 5 years. The best ones are often the first to go. Its tragic. But nonetheless I believe it is always possible to do something if we are opportunists about creating 'pockets of democracy.'

Many English schools produce impressive mission statements – WE HELP OUR STUDENTS BECOME GOOD CITIZENS (but give them no opportunity to participate in democratic decision making)– WE PREPARE OUR STUDENTS FOR WORTHWHILE CAREERS (but gives them no choice or autonomy and you change room every hour when a bell rings) – WE FOSTER LIFE-LONG LEARNING (by making them feel they can't wait to be finished with school learning – more like LIFELONG FORGETTING) – WE HELP EVERY CHILD TO FULFIL THEIR POTENTIAL (while forcing them all through a subject based exam machine, divided up by age, with little control over their time or their learning.) The Exams are designed to fail many young people in the name of maintaining 'standards' and create anxiety in the successful.

Wayne Jennings book 'School Transformation' brilliantly exposes the hypocrisy of school mission statements!

Currently the English school system takes little regard for the interests, strengths and passions of each student, and does not help them discover and develop their own self-actualised identity.

But we have some schools that are not like this and our next session will tell us about a city-wide youth led movement for change in Portsmouth UK which is supported by head teachers.

I will conclude with three proposals for our public school systems –

First – we need to create departments for alternative education within our ministries of education to create experimental democratic schools that are free for parents.

Second – all schools should introduce the 20% principle. 20% of curriculum time should be available for all children of all ages, ideally in mixed age groups, to practise self-directed learning around their own interests and passions. This could be one whole day or two half days per week or even just 20% of time within subject lessons. Schools should create a '20% Committee' of staff and students to plan how this programme would be organised. This would introduce the idea of students participating in serious school decision making.

A 20% department should be created led by a teacher of assistant principal status and staffed by teachers from all subjects who chose to work in this way. This would create a team of experienced self-directed learning facilitators. It could have its own part of the school buildings - the 20% wing where presentations of student projects could be held. An entirely new approach to assessment would be required based on processes rather than finished projects – failure would be something to be learned from and not to be feared. 20% of students of mixed ages would be in the 20% wing at any one time.

Recently the Economist produced a report called “Staff 2030: The Future of Teacher Training.” It recommends 20% of curriculum time for student directed learning claiming that the competencies developed are precisely those required for the future workplaces of the 4th Industrial revolution. The autonomous learners and creators which our current school systems are not producing. It is ironic that the evolved nature of human childhood as described by Bruner and Gray now aligns with the needs of enlightened employers – yet so few schools are making the connection.

Google already provide staff with 20% of their paid time to develop projects that interest them, not directly related to company projects. Susan Wojcicki, now CEO of Youtube, created G-mail in her 20% time when she was at Google.

A “20 time” movement is growing in California known as “innovation or ‘moon-shot’ time where students are free to come up with their own idea of what they want to do and study, and how they want to do it.” “Your students will be future ready if you give them the time!” it says. And time is perhaps the greatest gift we can give young people.

We must stop filling every moment at school and at home with coercive curriculum. They have realised this in Finland where the school day is short and there is little set homework.

Democratic schools such as Sudbury Valley, or Hadera or Summerhill have already reversed the 20/80 to 80/20. Students know how to take control and responsibility for their own learning - how to be curious, creative, collaborative and communicative.

The students of democratic schools learn how to participate in managing their communities while respecting human rights and they learn to discover their own genius, create their own identities rather than being defined by test scores. As paid employment declines with AI and 4IR this will enable them to

be unique creative socially responsible individuals and not rely on full time paid work for their identity. Soon we will need some form of universal basic income to support this.

Third - create more alternative democratic schools within large mainstream schools – schools within schools. These would offer parents, students and teachers the choice of a full-time self-directed and democratic school experience within a conventional school.

There is a history of such schools in the United States. Recently the idea has spread to Europe with examples in London, Prague, and Tallin. Charlie Moreno-Romero from Suvemae school in Estonia is here today and will say a few words about his project.

I will end on a note that gives me great hope.

All around the world we are seeing campaigns for change coming from young people themselves. In England one group called 'Teach the Future' argues for a climate change curriculum. They wanted to be here but they have their own COP26 event in Scotland today. Another group is called 'Pupil Power' and I am pleased that Aliyah and Simi are with us to say a few words now and many more at the sofa debate tomorrow

Derry Hannam, Seaford , UK. derry.hannam245@gmail.com

Book link - <https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/1029100> CODE

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