

I MORE OR LESS STOPPED SPEAKING

Rachel Roberts

When I was 12 years old I was a student at the state comprehensive school in our town. I had always been a bright student; intelligent, interested, motivated. But now I was struggling. Struggling with the system; authority, staying in the top sets, exam pressures, social pressures and rules from above which made no sense to me. I became depressed and ill. I stopped attending school, I more or less stopped speaking, I pretty much stopped being recognisable as me. My parents were worried and desperate, what could be a solution? What could bring their daughter back?

We were lucky enough to live in beautiful south Devon near Sands, the democratic school . A family friend knew of the school and through fortunate circumstances offered to assist in paying the school fees. I had heard of this school, and I was wary: Wasn't this a school for special kids, problem kids? I decided to give it a try none the less.

On my first trial day I sat down with a teacher, and he said, "How about I tell you, you don't have to sit any exams, in fact you don't have to do anything you don't want to." This was perfect. Within my trial week I already began the slow process of coming back to myself. Without the pressure from others I only had myself and my expectations to live up to, and my self expectations were plenty high enough. I'd always loved the structure of rules but never understood all the pointless rules in life, here I could be a part of making up the rules ensuring that only rules which made sense existed. The school fitted like a glove.

I did many things in my three years at Sands. I wrote poetry, made crazy sculptures, climbed, made a million pompoms, performed in plays, drank never-ending pots of tea, jumped in the river, talked about everything from geese to feminism, chaired school meetings, campaigned, communicated with people of all ages, listened and – somewhere within it all – completed 8 GCSE's grades A-C.

I left Sands feeling indestructible. I was confident, maybe a little arrogant. I had learnt a way of functioning in this world that was respectful and made sense. I knew I could reason my way in and out of anything. I felt I was far better prepared for the big wide world than my contemporaries. I knew what I wanted and I knew how to be motivated to achieve things on my own.

This was initially mistaken as 'bad attitude' by my tutors at college. They knew I had come from Sands and expected me to be a 'problem student' from the beginning. To begin with, being back in the authority structures of the system was a real struggle, but after a few months I learnt where the boundaries were and how I could push them within reason, and my tutors learnt to appreciate my direct manner.

I went on to study Sociology at the University of York. At the beginning of university I still felt I was better prepared than my peers. I already knew about independent learning, and isn't that what university is about after all? I suffered a bit of a shock: it was that classic big fish in a little pond into little fish in a big ocean phenomenon. No one knew me, I had no personal relationships with my tutors, and it finally dawned on me that although I had been directing my own learning it had always been within a small supportive environment with lots of one-to-one interaction. Once again it was a struggle. I actually had to learn how self-governed learning really works, but I got there in the end.

My interest in democratic education never left me. I took elective modules in 'Education towards a better world' and 'Philosophy of Education'. I wrote my dissertation on 'Idealism meets Reality' discussing what kinds of people may be products of democratic education and to what extent they are or aren't prepared for integration into this society.

After university I worked for 6 months in a children's care home. This was challenging and a big learning curve for me. The children and I came from different worlds. They quite literally couldn't comprehend being treated or listened to with the kind of respect which I had come to learn everyone deserves.

Upon leaving this job I had remembered why I believed in the importance of democratic education and was determined to do something more actively

involved. One day I optimistically typed 'Democratic Education Jobs' into Google. And unbelievably an internship with the Phoenix Education Trust appeared. I had missed the application deadline, but I called up anyway: this was exactly what I wanted to be doing. I worked with Phoenix for just over a year, initially as an intern and then as an employee. Through this I worked with the English Secondary Students Association (ESSA) coordinating their annual Student Voice conference and delivering workshops in a range of schools. We offered the schools assistance in developing their student voice programs, helping students' voices actually to be heard and student councils to function actually democratically.

After a year of doing this I was wanting to take a step further in the radical direction and gain some experience working with younger children. I spoke with Anna Leatherdale from Phoenix about this, and she suggested I contact the Free School in Leipzig, people whom she and I had gotten to know through EUDEC. I wrote an email application and secured an internship as an English mother- tongue worker in the school.

I came to Leipzig for a 6 month placement without knowing a word of German. (I'd never chosen to learn a language. I just didn't want to so I didn't ... I was a student at a democratic school, you know.) Now a year and a half later I have a full-time teaching post at the school, and I can speak German almost fluently .

Without democratic education I don't know what would have become of me. But I definitely wouldn't be here doing this as I am now. It has shaped everything in my life so far and will continue to shape my future.