

ADDRESS TO THE PUBLIC SESSION AT THE EUDEC

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The first EUDEC – European Democratic Education Conference – was held at the University of Leipzig from July 25 – August 3 2008. The conference was open to the public for two days. Leonard Turton gave one of the introductory addresses. This is a transcript.

The aims of the European Democratic Education Community are:

- * To support all forms of democratic education throughout Europe
- * To promote democratic education as the sensible educational model for all democratic states
- * To establish, in legislation, the right to found and attend democratic schools and to provide aid and support to democratic schools and start up groups
- * To facilitate the exchange of information between democratic schools in Europe and create connections between schools for co-operation and mutual learning

EUDEC today is the result of two years of co-operative planning effort by an incredibly dedicated group of students, teachers, and organisations from the UK, Germany, Denmark, Austria, Poland, the Netherlands and Finland. We are a very ambitious organisation. You will be hearing a lot more about us and about democratic education in the near future.

During this Open Session, you will have the opportunity to find out more about EUDEC, to become a member, and to be actively involved in our community. The EUDEC Council Information tables will be open all day, each day, so that you can read our literature and chat with Council members. If you would like to visit a democratic school in Europe, or to see a large state school that has been experimenting with democratic structures, to experience first hand what takes place, let us know and we will try our best to help you to do just that.

It is important to understand that democratic education is not new. It has been around for nearly a century. It is not radical. It is not experimental. Democratic education is a proven educational fact, with schools running throughout North America and Europe, as well as other parts of the world. Democratic education has been successful in small independent schools, in large state schools, in day schools, in boarding schools. It is applicable everywhere, given the right conditions and the willingness to allow children to practise living a democratic life.

It is nothing to be afraid of – unless you are a control freak. No one here, I'm sure, could possibly be a control freak.

I began a democratic school near Toronto, Canada in 1971. I also founded a small democratic home school learning centre in 1983. For many years I worked in an inner city state school of 300, where over the course of five years we democratised the upper floor, six classes, with the invention of Clubhouse Democracy. This transformed the lives of students and teachers. I will be talking about that process in a workshop tomorrow.

For the last six years I have been a teacher and Curriculum Advisor at Summerhill School in England. Some of you might know about A.S. Neill and Summerhill. One of the things he said to people was that children had the free choice to go to lessons or to play. This is true but this is also a modest explanation of what Summerhill is about.

What Summerhill, what democratic education is about, is profound. It has to do with time, and the construction of authentic self through free choice of action in time.

At Summerhill, a child wakes up each morning and has the free choice of personal action in democratic community. The democratic and the community are essential components in all of this; otherwise you might get action that impacts too negatively on others. Free choice of action in a democratic community keeps the balance right.

Now, as a child chooses what to do during the day, his actions – with the world at large, with others in the community – and the reactions that follow from these actions create a person. The child creates himself through these relationships.

If, on the other hand, someone else controls his time, and controls his actions, then the child is simply acting out, like a puppet, the designs of others on him. He is not making himself, he is being created by others, for some purposes basically unknown to him – to make him a useful economic unit, a brave soldier ready to go 'over the top' in the thousands, an obedient worker, a loyal citizen, a good religious follower.

Such a child is an inauthentic person. Inauthentic people are not happy people. Unhappy people do unhappy things. Millions of them might actually create an unhappy world. And, of course, this inauthentic person has very little idea what free choice or democracy are all about, even if he is the citizen of a free and democratic state. I know this because I see adults from democratic states visit democratic schools all the time – they are, to say the least, taken aback. Often dumbfounded.

This sounds like a new age deal but it's not. Children come to democratic schools at, say 11, and they are usually out of focus. That's an odd thing to say and you kind of have to be there to experience it. But it's true. They are out of focus because they aren't themselves. They aren't themselves because they have had their time taken away and their choice of action controlled. But over time they regain focus, they rediscover themselves. It's quite extraordinary to see this, to see children wondering at their own true nature appearing from within.

What we do to children with our traditional education is that outrageous. It is simply so all pervasive that it appears to be normal.

When I was a small boy I went to the Buffalo zoo, in Buffalo New York, across the border from Canada. And it was an old fashioned zoo. I remember the lion, in a rectangular cage, pacing back and forth, back and forth. I remember the neurotic monkeys, in a concrete bunker, shrieking. Well, you may not agree with the idea of zoos at all, but modern zoos are very much different than those traditional ones. They pay proper attention to natural habitat, each animal has a mini-habitat that fits its natural state.

You know what I'm going to say. Over 100 years ago we started to line up groups of 30 children inside small rectangular boxes. Kind of like stuffing biscuits in a conveyor belt tin. Today? Well, today we pretty much still line up 30 children or more in rectangular boxes. Kind of like stuffing Smarties into a box.

In 2008, we definitely give zoo animals better habitats to live in than we do our own children. I'm not exactly sure what this says about our culture. It can't be good.

Freedom and democracy should be the first components of any democratic state's educational agenda. Not economics. The present system seems very efficiently bent on producing little economic warriors for the GNP, for the global economy's economic wars. Surely, a democratic state wants more from its citizens than millions of obedient economic warriors.

And let's stop with this education as religion nonsense, with our children having to learn the proper sets of mostly irrelevant academic scripture lest they be cast into some horror of economic hell. Let's stop using such fear, smear tactics on the good parents and children of this world.

It's very simple, all of this. Let people be free adults by letting them be free children. Let people know what a real democratic life is by letting children practise real democracy. Trust the children and the citizens of a state to be intelligent, to make choices for themselves, to create the state they want to create, instead of having others create it for them, through them, one dysfunctional educational year after another.

In our Clubhouse Democracy we had a booklet we used for new classes, to explain what we were all about. This bit is called The Cube, and I would read this out to 12 year olds. You might think that it would be a dangerous thing

to do, to describe their habitat this way, that it might incite or depress them. It did neither, because they already knew the facts. What they were, instead, was greatly relieved – relieved that the adults who taught them, had finally admitted the truth.

The Cube

For some reason many years ago adults decided to put children of the same age into Cubes all day for 190 days a year in order to get them ready for life. Then they put an adult into the Cube with the children and the adult's job was to try and stay alive while he got the children ready for life.

Now the adults just didn't put a few children in the Cubes, they crammed as many as forty into each. And it didn't matter that the children grew bigger ... for some reason the adults still gave the same sized Cubes to 6 year olds as they did to 14 year olds.

Go figure.

Then the adults made a big list of what they thought the children should have to know to be successful when they grew up. Often the adults would discuss and argue about this. And every few years they often changed their minds.

But one thing stayed the same. The students were never asked their opinions of anything. They weren't asked if they thought the Cube was a good idea in the first place or, once there, what they thought they should do all day while they were in it.

The only thing the children could do to show how they felt about being in the Cube was to misbehave and take revenge on the adult who was crammed into the Cube with them.

Some students became very good at this. The adults called them troublemakers.

Actually, they were just children who didn't like the Cube.

Some teachers invented democratic education. Adults called them a bit – odd. Actually, they were just people who thought education, and children, deserved something better.