

## Executive Summary

# Identifying the Ingredients of Democratic Education at The New School

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The New School (TNS) is a fee-free independent democratic school in south London, founded in 2020. The school is non-selective with a comprehensive intake, working with around 100 young people aged four to fourteen (though the school will eventually go up to 16 and offer GCSEs). TNS's approach is driven by the desire to give every student a powerful sense of agency - the will and the ability to positively influence their own lives and the world around them. Accordingly, the school aims to create an educational space that allows young people to be recognised and to participate in democratic decision-making structures as equals, to have their interests and priorities acknowledged and valued, and to develop the skills they need for mental, physical and emotional wellbeing. Among the school's key structural and pedagogical features are small class sizes (around 15 young people per teacher), participatory decision-making systems based on 'sociocratic' (consent-based) principles, an approach to discipline that doesn't use punishments, a strong emphasis on inclusion, and delineated space in the timetable for child-led/self-directed learning activities.

In September 2021, UCL entered into a research collaboration with TNS to identify the key 'ingredients' of the school's pedagogic model. By pedagogy, we mean the methods of teaching and learning used in practice, and how these contribute to a school environment. The UCL research team consisted of Dr Alison Macdonald (Principal Investigator), Department of Anthropology, Dr Caroline Oliver (Co-Investigator), Institute of Education, and a research assistant, Tahsin Tarzan Gemikonakli. The research was funded by a UCL Grand Challenges Small Research Grant in the stream of Justice and Equality. Research was conducted in the school between January and July 2023. The research project was evaluated by The UCL Research Ethics Committee in the 'high risk' category and was approved in November 2022. The ethics Project ID number is: 6343/002.

The objective of the research was to support the TNS's development of system innovation and provide evidence-based recommendations to:

- Enhance school practice by supporting the school community to develop 'a consistent and shared set of theories, language and tools for democratic education' (Townsend et al., 2021:12);
- Develop system innovation by providing data that evidences its educational operations and thereby support the replicability and scalability of the school model to a wider external audience.

A qualitative methodology was devised to meet these research objectives, aiming to capture both the meta mechanisms of educational practice, and the subjective experiences and interpretations of these mechanisms on the ground. However, it is important to stress that this research does not prove outcomes nor show correlations; the intention of the research was to document practice, not prove its effects. Rather the major scope of the research was to generate data as evidence of the unique ways of working at TNS in a specific moment in time. Given the focus to describe data, this summary does not include scholarly analysis nor comparisons to other institutions and organisations. A more detailed presentation of all the data,

rooted in in-depth theoretical analysis and situated with comparative case studies and scholarly debates will be published in a forthcoming open access book with UCL Press, anticipated in 2026.

## **Methodology**

The research deployed a qualitative research methodology that aimed to generate theories based on data grounded in the empirical reality of the research context. This involved a reflexive and iterative approach to data collection, coding, and repeat visits to the field to refine emerging findings. Analysis was undertaken with the aim of developing categories that are grounded in the data and the UCL researcher's interpretations of the data. In this vein, the research combined four interlinked strands:

1. Close engagement with the school culture (ethnographic research). A total of 256 hours of ethnographic research was conducted in the school between January and July 2023.
2. Generating feedback from the young people and adults through photography (photovoice). A total of 2,313 photographs and 24 hours of transcripts produced from both photovoice projects. In addition, participants produced posters, drawings, poems and playdough figurines to illustrate their points. The UCL research team also documented the research process through their own photographs, note-taking and audio recordings of the sessions, all of which were transcribed.
3. Seven semi-structured interviews with adults at the school. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.
4. Systematic process of data collection, coding, categorization, and analysis to identify patterns and relationships in the data. Data were synthesized together in a holistic approach to extrapolate patterns and processes, accounting for consistency as well as variability in the multiple perspectives and interpretations of the school community.

This report, drawn from a first round of analysis of extensive qualitative data, highlights five key ingredients constitutive of TNS' distinctive model of democratic education: relational practice, multisensory learning environment, flexible system, play and self-directed learning. Though identified separately, the report shows they work in complementary and overlapping ways. Throughout the research, we engaged consistently with community members – both young people and adults, to hear both how the school worked for them, as well as ways that TNS could continue to make their experience work better. The full report ends therefore with a series of recommendations (see page 47) co-produced with TNS community members and informed by the research findings.

## **Key Finding 1: Relational Practice**

We identified four elements of relational practice as a key ingredient of TNS education, which contribute to building positive relationships:

1. Relational practice is enacted through a human-centered and needs based pedagogy, underscored by a non-punitive approach that encourages non-judgemental understanding of everyone's needs, wants and emotional states, contributing to feelings of trust and inclusivity within the school.

2. Recognising friendship relations as intrinsic to education, to be supported through the encouragement of deep and playful encounters amongst adults and young people, through a caring and egalitarian culture.
3. TNS adopts a holistic approach to young people's needs where the young person is perceived in context, as 'in relation' to their broader familial and social situations beyond school. This informs an empathetic environment for learning and facilitates the needs-based approach in practice.
4. Emotional expression, role-modelling and repair support the establishment and maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships for all in the school community.

## **Key Finding 2: Multisensory Learning Environment**

Holding space for diverse multisensory preferences and the way these combine in embodied interaction in learning is a key ingredient of TNS's educational model:

1. As per the human-centered approach, adults recognise the important role of sensory systems and stimuli for physical and emotional regulation at different developmental stages in the educational experience.
2. Adults are responsive, wherever possible, to the diverse range of sensorial preferences of the class community.
3. Adults and young people work in partnership to negotiate diverse sensorial preferences, which contributes to the co-creation of an embodied learning environment.
4. Together, findings 1-3 facilitate bodily agency in learning, and is related to TNS's relational and needs-based approach which underpins their democratic and inclusive pedagogy.

## **Key Finding 3: Flexible System**

Within the school system, practices are flexible, provisional, and open to revision:

1. The mechanism of sociocracy supports members of TNS community to create consent-based agreements, facilitating a malleable system that adapts according to the needs of the school community.
2. The flexible system is also generated through 'self-made' routines, rituals, and traditions which emerge organically from community interactions and needs and solidify into class and school structures over time. These traditions support relationship building in the school, creating a sense of predictability, and belonging, as well as solidifying friendships as young people are free to create 'social routines' together.
3. The TNS system is forged in an experimental spirit, underpinned by a drive to try out novel approaches and generate the best ways of being as a school. Central to this is encouragement to try new things and to learn from failures. Experimentality is a key enabler of the flexible system.
4. Adults express some anxiety about working within a flexible system that is by nature complex, time intensive and exposes tensions with trying to conform to more standardised school policies.

## **Key Finding 4: Freedom to Play**

An open culture for play is encouraged by the experimental ethos of the school:

1. Young people are trusted, within appropriate boundaries of safety, to play in physically demanding and 'risky' ways.
2. Uninhibited play is seen to facilitate physical and social forms of creativity,

- improvisation with the natural environment and school materials and it encourages learning about limits and responsibilities to self and others.
3. These forms of play are intrinsic to relational practice and creating a sense of belonging, where:
    - a. Open conditions for play create opportunities for resourceful and collaborative peer activities, opportunities for authentic self-expression, and social and emotional testing and exploration. These conditions allow young people to act authentically on their feelings and interests in intrinsically motivated ways.
    - b. Play facilitates bonding, relationship building, and opportunities to consider responsibilities to others, creating informal intersubjective dynamics which supports the development of an egalitarian culture within the school among both young people and adults.
  4. The facilitation of spontaneous play in the classroom supports learning through the application of skills. This corresponds with the experimental approach to education, enabling agile and flexible teaching methods aimed at enhancing young people's agency in learning.

### **Key Finding 5: Self-directed Learning**

1. While self-directed learning (SDL) implies individual learning, in fact 'togetherness' is an important way of working for young people during this time. SDL fosters a collaborative learning environment whereby young people share in each other's learning experiences; this is experienced as liberating.
2. Young people at TNS highly value SDL because of the freedom to pursue their own personal interests and to choose activities. However, young people would like the opportunity to spend more of SDL outdoors and for those who do not do so already, would also like to mix across classes.
3. There is a tension between young people's expectations of 'free choice' in SDL and adults re-directing choice to support intentional learning and progress in learning a wide range of skills. Adults expressed discomfort and ambiguity about this process.
4. There are points of divergence in SDL practice across TNS; teachers interpret the purpose and structure of self-directed learning differently, and there is some confusion about how to utilise adult led policies and structures such as My Learning Plan, skills menu and progression grid in practice. Some young people raise concerns about pressures associated with goal setting and planning, advocating for more flexibility and options to change their minds in SDL.