Summary of Research Findings

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 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:
    - 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.
    - 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.

Introduction

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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 produce 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 received ethical approval from the UCL Research Ethics Committee in the 'high risk' category in November 2022, Project ID number 6343/002.

Research Questions and Aims

The objective of this 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 some of its educational operations and thereby support the replicability and scalability of the school model to a wider external audience.

To meet these research objectives, we devised a qualitative methodology that aimed to capture both the meta mechanisms of educational practice and subjective experiences and interpretations of these mechanisms on the ground. From these aims, we formulated two research questions:

Q1: What are the key ingredients of The New School's educational model?
Here, our aim was to identify the everyday 'ways of working' that underpin the practice of democratic education in the school.

Q2: How do key educational ingredients operate effectively in school for teachers and young people?

Here, we aimed to:

- Uncover how and why the key ingredients contribute to beneficial outcomes for young people, including self-efficacy, self-esteem, educational engagement, emotional well-being and life satisfaction.
- Generate understanding of how and why these key ingredients contribute to some beneficial outcomes for teachers.

The Scope of Research Findings: How to read this summary

Our research revealed five key ingredients that contribute to TNS's democratic education: relational practice, a multisensory learning environment, a flexible system freedom for play and self-directed learning. Though identified separately, these ingredients operate in complementary and overlapping ways (see Fig 1). Each chapter in this report presents one ingredient in turn, distilling data into a few major findings and providing evidence to substantiate how the ingredient operates within the school.

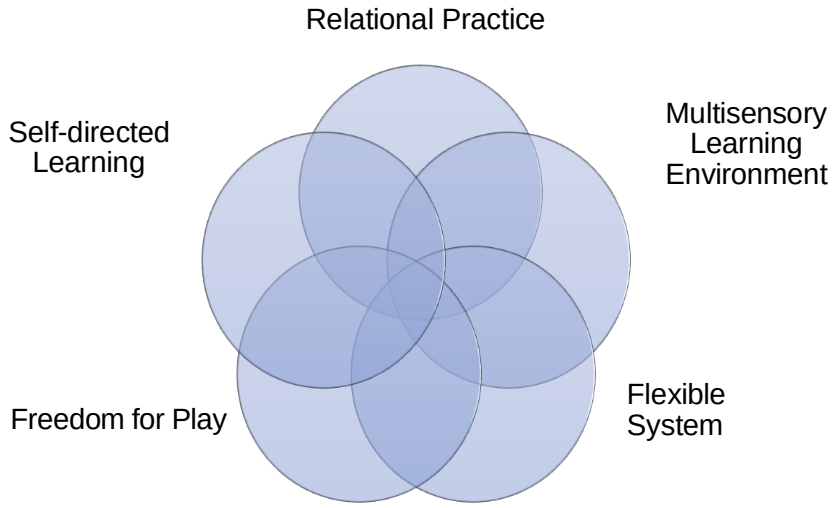

Figure 1: The key ingredients of the TNS education model. Macdonald & Oliver, 2024 ©

The following chapters each summarise a key ingredient and demonstrate how the school uses these ingredients in practice. Each chapter begins with key findings, followed by brief evidence for each element. Where possible, the analysis shows how key ingredients might contribute to some of the anticipated outcomes of the school. However, it is important to stress that this research does not prove outcomes nor show correlations or causal effects. The major intention of the research was to generate data to document TNS ways of working in a specific moment in time, not to prove impact. Therefore, this summary should be read as a first iteration of qualitative data analysis which presents a condensed outline of the overall data set. 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 detailed 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 project deployed a Grounded Theory qualitative methodology which generates theories based on data grounded in the empirical reality of the research context. This involves an inductive approach in which participants guide the direction of data collection and determine the major themes of the research. The methodology involved a reflexive and iterative approach to data collection and coding, where repeat visits were made to the school to refine emerging findings. Analysis was undertaken with the aim of developing categories that are grounded in the data and the UCL researchers' interpretations of the data, drawing on their expertise in anthropology, sociology and education studies. In this vein, the research combined four interlinked methodological strands:

Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative methodology that generates empirical data about human social behavior through immersion in a social setting using the method of participant observation – direct first-hand experience of observing and participating in participants' daily lives. Ethnographic research also captures how people interpret and make sense of their social interactions and everyday surroundings, thereby revealing subjective and collective beliefs, attitudes, and value systems. 256 hours of ethnographic research was conducted in the school between January and July 2023. This included 236 hours of participant observation by Dr Alison Macdonald in Classes 2, 3, and 4, as well as 20 hours of participant observation in Class 2 by Dr Caroline Oliver. Beyond the classroom, the researchers also ate lunch with the classes participating in research, hung out in the staff room, and observed play time. Dr Alison Macdonald also attended Time to Connect council meetings over one term, observed Class 2's progress meeting, and attended two curriculum circle meetings.

Photovoice

Photovoice is a participatory methodology in which participants are active agents in the data collection process. Participants collect data by identifying and documenting their experiences through photography, and engaging in iterative processes of photographic reflection, using dialogue and other creative methods (drawing; playdough modelling) to draw out important areas of community life and make recommendations for community change. The UCL research team organized two photovoice projects in TNS. Each project was organized over a school term, involving eight x 1.5-hour sessions with young people and adults, and facilitated by the full research team with participants taking photographs in between sessions:

- **Photovoice 1** focused on 'the ingredients of The New School' and involved 10 participants (4 staff; 6 young people).
- **Photovoice 2** focused on 'self-directed learning' and involved 15 participants (10 young people and 5 staff). Note: one young person and one teacher chose to withdraw from the photovoice project after week 6.
- Dr Macdonald also conducted a 2-week photovoice project with a young person from class 4.

A total of 2,313 photographs and 24 hours of transcripts were produced from the photovoice projects. In addition, participants produced posters, drawings, poems and playdough figurines to illustrate their points in sessions. 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.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews produce data that is articulated and explicitly conveyed by participants. They provide insight into one person's interpretations of the social world and their own motivations and decision-making processes. Dr Macdonald conducted seven semi-structured interviews with adults at the school. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by Dr Macdonald and Dr Oliver through an inductive and thematic approach. This involved detailed coding of the data through constant comparisons across and between data to identify recurrent patterns and themes. 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.

Limitations

Although the research was in-depth, there were some limitations:

1. The data is partial. Not all TNS classes were included in the ethnography, and within consenting classes, not all young people consented to observation. Likewise, not all adults consented to participate in the project, and several areas of school life were not included: restorative circles and operations and governance meetings. As such, the data presented here reflects the perspective of the people who participated in the research, and other perspectives present in the school will not be included.

2. Given we deployed an inductive and participatory methodology, the findings represent some of the major priorities and experiences of the participants. Whilst the research did capture other elements of school practice, these data are not presented here e.g. assessment practices, restorative practice, and curriculum development. Further research would be required to explore other aspects of TNS education in detail.
3. The research presents a snapshot of school activities and experiences in specific moment in time. Naturally, the school model will evolve and thus these findings are subject to change.

Chapter 1

Relational Practice

1.1 Introduction

Positive relationships at school help young people thrive, but the degree to which this is recognised and worked on in daily school practices varies widely. Our research identified a heightened attention to developing and nurturing positive relationships at TNS. These are seen as integral to young people's educational experiences, especially through creating a powerful feeling of inclusivity and belonging within the community. TNS advocates for a pedagogy (teaching and learning methods) based on 'relational practice', whereby relationships are perceived as central to all learning dynamics. These dynamics are driven by an ethos which aims to 'connect' as opposed to 'control' and community members are encouraged to engage in egalitarian, caring and restorative interpersonal interactions. We identify relational practice to be the cornerstone of TNS culture and as integral to the everyday success of many other practices and systems within the school. Here we summarise TNS relational practice, beginning with key findings, followed by more detailed evidence for each element.

1.2 Key Findings

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-judgmental 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.

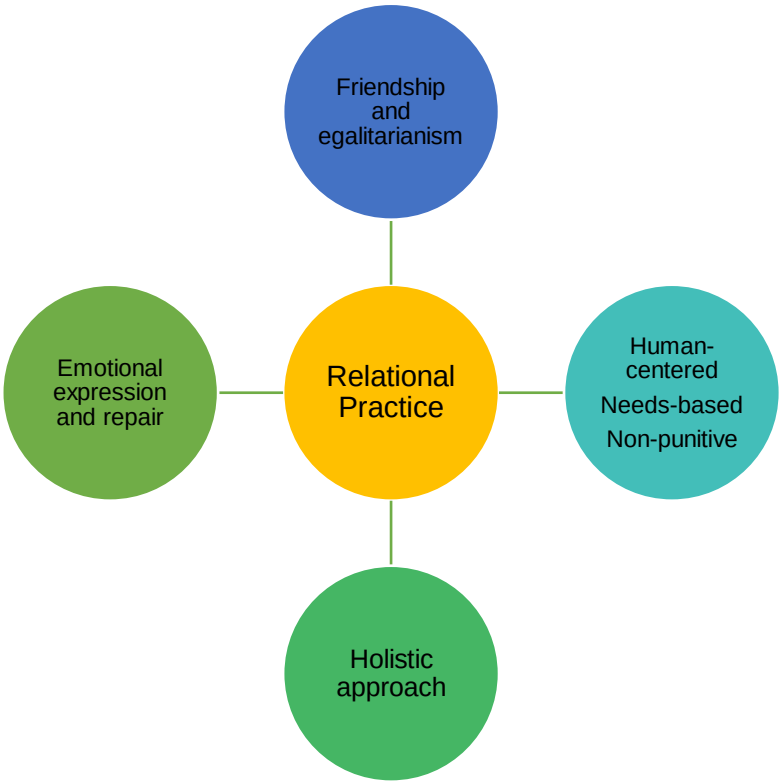

Figure 1: The core mechanisms of relational practice in TNS. Macdonald & Oliver, 2024. ©

1.3 Needs-based and Non-Punitive Approach

> '*you have to read their minds. It's [about] getting to know them, being attuned to their needs*' [teacher]

> '*I think we all agree it's a line we don't want to cross ... non-punitive is so core to what we do'* [teacher]

TNS operates a 'human-centered' approach which recognises the agency of adults and young people in the educational experience. In line with this approach, TNS implements a 'needs-based' pedagogy which recognises that all individuals have differing needs and impulses which can impact experiences of school. A dominant feature of the needs-based pedagogy is working to meet or negotiate individual needs so that young people to have autonomy over their learning and accountability for their behaviour, but without the use of punishment.

Evidence:

- At TNS, both young people and adults are taught, supported and model to each other the importance of expressing personal needs, to build strong relationships where all feel respected. TNS structures like Circle Time (see chapter 3) permit young people and teachers to express where things are not working for them and engage in collaborative decision-making. For example, teachers and young people shared their own impressions of a classroom ceiling colour and made claims to changing it in the future.

- TNS pedagogic practice was understood by adults as focused on meeting young people's needs. Numerous observations in the ethnography crossed referenced this, with examples of individual needs being met daily in school, through personalised judgements and agreements about appropriate conduct, meeting preferences to suit different individuals' learning needs by offering a range of activities that are suitable for the level of skill and confidence in the classroom, and working to navigate emotional and sensory needs (see Chapter 2 for major example of this approach in action).

- The needs-based approach increases young people's autonomy over their learning in school, but this does not mean they can do whatever they want without consequence. Instead, TNS encourages everyone to act with a level of 'responsible freedom' (Rogers, 1969) and act with a level of accountability within collective boundaries that are negotiated in practice. To achieve this, adults engage in intensive relational work to 'hold boundaries' around young people's choices and behaviour (see chapter 5 for examples). Creating and holding boundaries is an integral mechanism through which TNS is able to advance its needs-based and non-punitive approach and relies on careful negotiation and re-negotiations of freedoms around behaviour, learning choices and self-expression.

- There is a high degree of reflexivity about 'behaviour as communication' at TNS and adults respond to challenging behaviour through a pastoral lens by adopting a curious and caring stance (see Fig. 2). The school strives to create a culture of openness around conflict conflicting individual and collective needs, even if all those needs ultimately can't be met. This occurs through constant processes of boundary- setting (as stated above) where 'agreements' are created collectively, couched in positive language, provisional suggestion, and requests to co-produce solutions, rather than via authoritative forbidding of behaviours, denying and refusing requests or punishment (see Case Study 1 and chapter 3). In cases of major conflict, restorative circles support the management of interpersonal difficulties. Rather than shy away from or forbid highly charged emotions (see 1.6 below) TNS recognises that conflict and differences of opinions are inevitable, but repair and accountability are necessary and can be managed safely.

- Although an effective approach to increasing young people's autonomy in school, the needs-based and non-punitive pedagogy and its associated work of boundary setting is experienced by adults as very time consuming and a pedagogy that requires intensive emotional input across all aspects of school life.

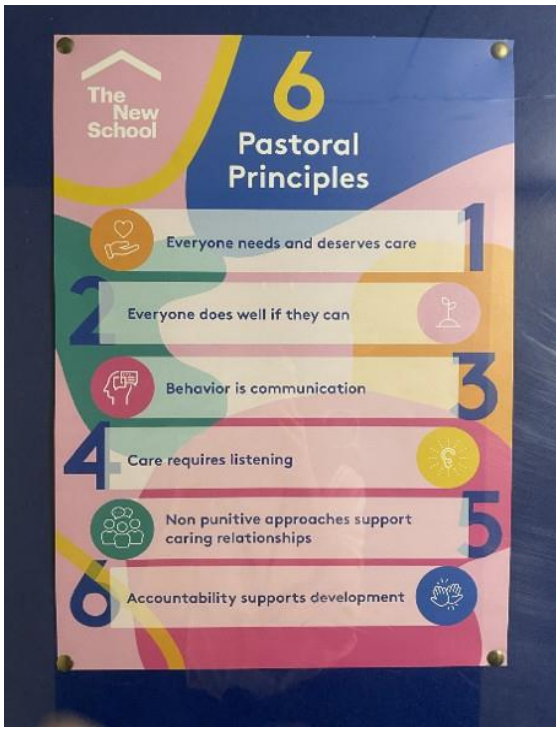

Figure 2: Pastoral Principles. Photo credit: Caroline Oliver.

Case Study 1: Holding boundaries over different needs.

In one of our first photovoice sessions, some of the young people were playing with cameras: clicking them on and off. This was quite noisy and distracting, and the young people were also preoccupied with playing, rather than listening to the discussion. One of the teachers addressed this. First, she acknowledged the young people's motivation, recognising that playing with the cameras was exciting. She then stated an observation of the problem: that it can be distracting, and it can interfere with concentrating on the topic. She said, 'my idea is this' and explained that the cameras should be left to the side. However, she then gave room for other points of view, inviting others to disagree, and invited the young people to discuss what 'we could do' instead, lacing her own solution with words like 'maybe' and 'I don't know'. As some young people pointed out how they liked playing with the cameras, she pointed out her own needs, for example that she found it distracting. She noted, 'I want both of our needs to be met. What do you think would be a good way to do that?' Ultimately, after some discussion, an agreement was made that cameras would be kept in the camera bags on the table during discussion.

1.4 Friendship and Egalitarian Dynamics

'*we're not tempted to elevate the needs of one of those people in that relationship'* [teacher]

The research documented multiple examples of respectful and healthy interactions between adults and young people, which contributed to positive, caring, and reduced hierarchical relationships within TNS community.

Evidence:

- When reflecting on what made TNS different, young people repeatedly referenced the immense significance of their friendships at school. Photographic data captured friends doing things that they enjoyed, and conveyed deep, emotional states of affection, admiration and love for both peers and adults at TNS (see Figs. 3& 4).

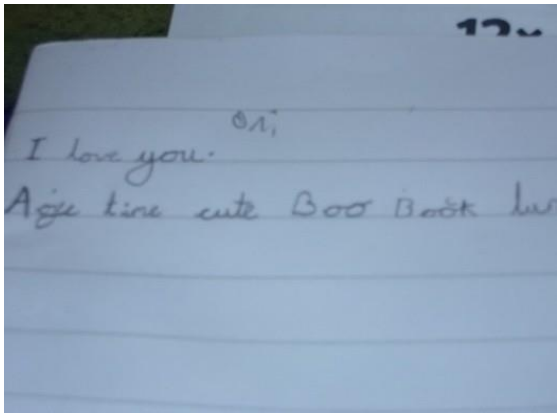

Figure 3: I love you. Caption and photo credit: Photovoice participant.

Figure 4: She be glowing. Slay queen. Caption and photo credit: Photovoice participant.

- Multiple opportunities for building and solidifying relationships are produced across the community, especially through physical play, 'social' play (e.g. acting out social dynamics and imaginative role play), joking and bantering (see also chapter 4) and repairing. These opportunities for relationship-building are not facilitated as 'add on' moments in recreational or extra-curricular times, but are recognised as vital throughout the school day.

- TNS organizes classes based on mixed-ages. Whilst hierarchical age structuring exists, together with other kinds of status practices amongst and between friendships groups, mixed age classes do potentially generate freer self-expression and social mixing, as well as the development of caring dynamics towards younger members of class groups.

- TNS dispels with other conventional practices that tend to establish hierarchy between young people and adults. TNS avoids traditional name-calling practices ('Sir', 'Miss' etc.), or physically 'setting apart' teachers (e.g. sitting at a desk or standing at the front of the room). Teachers are known by their first names, may share desks with young people (see Fig. 5), eat with their class at lunch time, and often prefer to sit amidst young people rather than stand upfront. These practices encourage young people and adults to relate to each other as level players. Young people are not 'expected' to immediately accept relationships with adults by virtue of their assigned role as 'teacher', but over time, as teachers demonstrate their trustworthiness and share a 'natural' authority (by virtue of education and or wisdom accrued through experience).

This more egalitarian way of relating results in strong relationships between young people and teachers, as evidenced by one young participant in class 2 captioning their photo of a teacher as ‘friend’ (see Fig. 6).

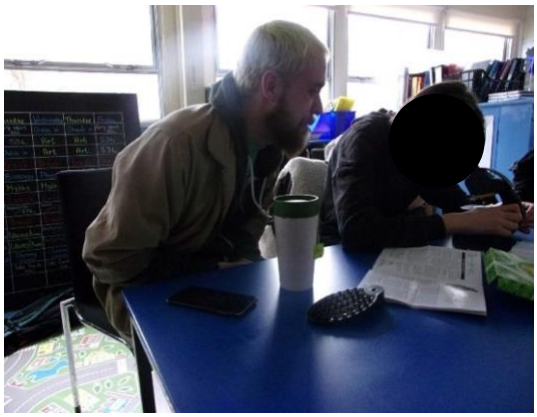

Figure 5: Sharing desks. Photo credit: Photovoice participant.

Figure 6: Friend. Caption and photo credit: Photovoice participant.

- Adults also strive to have caring and egalitarian relationships at TNS. Hierarchy does exist amongst adults through divisions of responsibility, expertise and length of service in the school. However, authority is also fluid and some decisions and processes are open to challenge and negotiation.

- Adults participate in consent-based sociocracy governance ‘circles’ (see chapter 3) that operate as decision making entities within the school. While this flatter model of governance is highly appreciated by adults, sometimes adults also felt overlooked in decision making processes which occurred outside of formal circle settings, describing these instances as lacking transparency and consultation.

- Adults value opportunities to ‘level’ hierarchical relations through informal, comfortable, playful and supportive interpersonal interactions e.g. at after-school meetings, participants reported playing games, which were experienced as having a bonding effect. Adults also reported craving more opportunities to connect and care for each other in working conditions that are time consuming and labour intensive and lead to high expectations for adult productivity.

1.5 A Holistic and Contextual Approach

'I need to know the context of the child in order to understand how to interact with them' [teacher]

TNS's relational approach is underpinned by a holistic understanding of young people's needs whereby the young person is perceived as 'in relation' with broader social and familial contexts beyond school. TNS operates with a fluidity of boundaries between home and school.

Evidence:

- TNS engages in context work through regular circle time check ins. Here, young people and adults are invited to share stories of lives: e.g. weekend plans, recounting recent experiences etc. Adults will also invite these discussions, where appropriate, with young people throughout the day. For example, if they can see a young person is tired and struggling to work, asking 'did you stay up late last night?' Or checking in about dynamics at home if a young person is acting out of character.

- Many parents whose children attend the school also work there, as teachers, catering staff etc. This gives the school a 'family atmosphere'. Indeed, one young person in the photovoice project took a photo of their parents and captioned it, *'school is like family'.*

- The holistic principle informs TNS pedagogy, whereby learning is personalised through a detailed understanding of developmental and learning challenges and meeting an individual 'where they are at'. In progress meetings, factors such as relationships to parents / care givers, routines at home, as well as potential attachment, SEND or trauma issues are carefully considered. Ethnographic evidence revealed that teachers think holistically when exploring reasons for a young person's behaviour in class, citing important contextual factors such as relationships at home, routines, sleep, diet, and previous educational experiences as potentially informing a young person's behaviour.

1.6 Emotions, Role-Modelling and Repair

TNS recognises emotions as a key dynamic of the classroom and strives to create a safe space for sharing a full range of emotions, where no types of emotion are labelled as 'good' or 'bad' for learning. This means supporting understanding of emotions and recognising (as one adult described it) an emotional 'messiness' in TNS, where strong emotions are not stigmatised, swept away, or contained (Link and Phelan 2012).

Evidence:

- The strong and deep relationships of TNS are maintained through attention to managing emotions and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. Young people are supported in their emotional literacy by naming and sharing emotions, and adults' role-modelling (e.g. see Case Study 2). This supports their mental wellbeing.

Case Study 2: Building Emotional Literacy.

During circle time a teacher frequently picks up on young people's stories about their home life and instigates a collective discussion to explore young people's emotional responses in more detail. This includes thinking through anxiety about travelling on the tube for a school trip to a farm and exploring the feeling that young report about being 'tired all the time'. It also includes addressing a young person's anxiety about tensions in their friendship groups and working though solutions to support them. In the latter case, knowing that the young person struggled with interpersonal peer relations more generally, the teacher asked the class to find ways to 'help' and think about 'how they would feel if it were them'. This resulted in a very moving scene whereby the young person's peers offered to hang out with them at playtime, inviting them to 'play the rock game' or 'join in for football'. The work of exploring emotional dynamics and then striving to find solutions collectively within the circle serves to hold emotional complexities in a safe way, and further reinforces a sense of belonging as part of the class culture.

- TNS' facilitation of emotional openness extends to adults. One expressed that in their former school, '*I was told to never apologise for anything as a teacher*'. Rather, at TNS adults are not expected to hide emotions or mistakes as in keeping with a role as an authority figure, and related, young people are taught to recognise teachers as fallible humans with needs of their own. For example, in the ethnography, there were cases of teachers returning to young people after a disagreement to apologise for misunderstandings or getting something 'wrong'.

- Adults are provided opportunities to regulate and process their emotions and work on relational dynamics, especially through 'reflective practice', a group organised discussion session. Whilst the principle is welcomed, participants expressed some ambiguity about its organisation with an outside facilitator, suggesting instead it could be run 'in-house' and engage a more playful spirit.

Chapter 2

Multisensory Learning Environment

2.1 Introduction

Prioritising multisensory experience is the second key ingredient of TNS educational practice. 'Multisensory' is defined as relating to physiological senses, including sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, proprioception (bodily awareness), the vestibular (movement and balance) and interoception (awareness of internal conditions of our body, such as hunger). Together, these senses play an essential role in the human capacity to engage in the world. Often in school environments, cognitive functions are deemed to be the most important for learning and multisensory preferences are associated with needs to be accommodated, or a source of disruption to be controlled. This is evident in the turn towards zero tolerance policies and regulation of bodily comportment, attire, and sensory regulation (e.g. toilet breaks). At the same time, there are new pressures for educators to pay more attention to the embodied sensory experience of learning, and this is a challenge taken up by TNS staff.

2.2 Key Findings

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 (see Chapter 1).

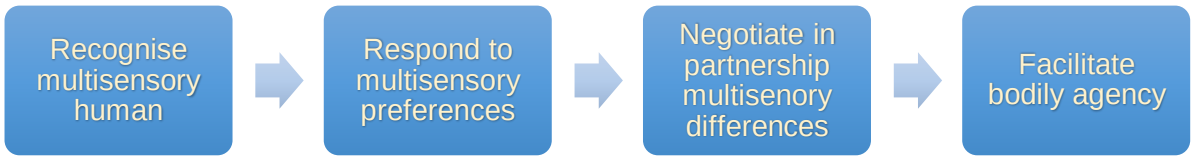

Figure 1: Key processes that contribute to co-creating multisensory learning environments at TNS. Macdonald & Oliver, 2024. ©

2.3 Recognising and Responding to Sensory needs

TNS honours basic human needs and tries to create learning environments that are responsive to diverse sensorial preferences.

Evidence:

- Across all classroom observations, needs such as hunger, thirst and toileting are met without permission needing to be sought. Young people can use the bathroom, eat, and drink in the classroom, with freshly prepared breakfast eaten in classrooms every morning, and fruit snacks provided to be eaten at any point throughout the day (see Figs 2&3).

Figure 2: Oranges during maths.
Photo credit: Alison Macdonald

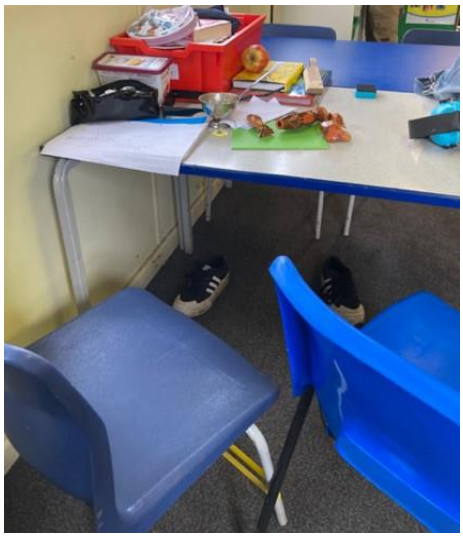

Figure 3: Shoes under the desk.
Apple and breakfast bowl on the desk.
Photo credit: Alison Macdonald

- Adults and young people at TNS can choose clothing and hair styles, according to their comfort or desire to express themselves. Adults do not set themselves apart by formal dress, and the TNS community accept preferences without judgement or justification. Young people can respond to their body temperature or sensory preferences by removing or layering items of clothing as they wish. They often walk around their classroom barefoot, with shoes and socks frequently abandoned around the classroom (see Fig 3).

- Movement within the school is not restricted; people move around the classroom as they wish, to find resources, get something from their tray, show their teacher their work or express curiosity about their peer's work. Young people take ownership of their classroom, and they can be seen standing on chairs to pin up decorations or water the plants. They move freely around the school as they return breakfast trays, go to the photocopier, or toilet; they do not have to line up or remain silent as they move around school (see Fig 4)

- Young people have considerable freedom to choose the most comfortable position and postures to engage in their learning. Whilst some chose to sit at their desk, others kneel on their chair or benches, sit on the chair with one leg tucked under the other, or even lie on the floor. The latter commonly occurs more in class 2, perhaps because the classrooms are a bigger size, and / or because it might be more developmentally appropriate for younger children to need to move around more.

- TNS employs learning through movement as a key pedagogic practice. For example, in one class, once a child had answered a question correctly, they went to a different area of the class and stood on the tables, until there were around six children standing on them. There is also 'movement maths' whereby young people must leave the classroom to go and find maths questions placed in a nearby corridor and come back to class with the answer.

- The learning environment is tactile and young people are encouraged to exploit the sensorial aspects of their environment in their play and learning (see chapter 4). Tactile materials have a strong presence in each classroom, and young people are encouraged to use them for emotionally regulation and scaffolding their learning. Each classroom has a 'peace' or 'reading corner' with tactile materials such as rugs, blankets, and cushions. In class 2, this also includes soft toys, and the break room used by classes 3 and 4 has a sofa and other soft materials, including a weighted blanket. Young people often chose to read and relax in these spaces, as well as lie down if feeling unwell or dysregulated. In many cases adults were observed encouraging young people who had become dysregulated to use these spaces, asking them if they 'need to go to the peace corner' or 'take some space in the break room'. Often, this would be accompanied by a supportive discussion with the adult and result in the young person returning to join the group activity.

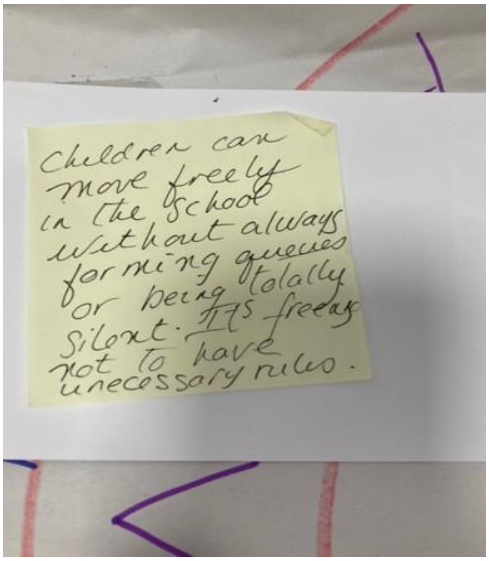

Figure 4: Reflection from photovoice about freedom to move in school. Photo credit: Alison Macdonald

2.4 Negotiating Diverse Multisensory Preferences

There is acceptance of variable sensorial stimuli across TNS, including low-level chatter, listening to music, fidgeting, handling objects and doodling, without a belief that this will impede the quality of attention and listening. On the contrary, in many cases these stimuli are permitted to precipitate learning as part of implementing a multisensory focused needs-based approach. Teachers and young people work in partnership to negotiate where needs clash.

Evidence:

- Young people expressed appreciation of this dimension to their learning; one participant in PV who took a photo of a YouTube music channel and captioned it, "*this captures music that was playing in class. It's nice to have music to focus sometimes in my class*" (see Fig. 5).
- Young people and adult recognise that meeting different sensorial preferences is an on-going challenge, as reactions to stimuli can clash. We observed TNS members working together through transparent discussion to negotiate a consensus around differences in tolerance (see Case Studies 1 and 2). These agreements are class specific and depend upon the unique multisensory preferences of adults and young people within each class.

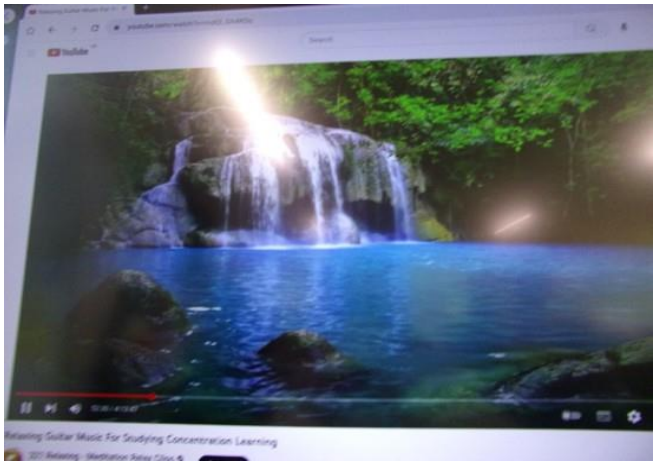

Figure 5: Photo of music playing on YouTube. Photo credit: Photovoice participant.

Case Study 1: Classroom ethnographic observation

During a maths lesson that is laced through with low level of chatter as normal, some young people sharing a table start making distinctive 'popping' and 'quacking' sounds with their mouths. Two other young people working on a different table ask the young people making the noises to be quiet because it's distracting. Their request is not acted upon, and the young people call the teacher over and complain to them that there is "noise", and they can't concentrate. The teacher asks the young people making the noises to try and be quiet, to which one of them replies, "quiet is creepy. I need sound to focus". The teacher acknowledges this need and instead offers a compromise and suggests putting on some background music. The young people seem to find this agreeable and stop making the noises and no one raises the issue again. After class, the teacher explains this process of negotiating differences to the researcher: '… I am trying to create a caring class with tolerance, rather than rules, so everyone can work in this class together'.

Case Study 2: Teacher narrative, Interview

'*I never felt uncomfortable with people doing something with their hands [but] when started here I was confused about what to do with that because there was lots of stuff out there and lots of stuff going on and it was too much for me, like I couldn't focus on what I was saying. So, we did a circle on it ... and it took a few rounds, and loads of them felt they could draw and listen, and none of them felt that other people drawing was too distracting for them to listen. We talked about noise and how that was important and how I find it really hard to listen when things are noisy. I don't mind motion so much. So yeah, we had various conversations about this apparently small thing of what you can do while you're listening. And that's what stuck, with some adjustments*'

Chapter 3

The Flexible System

3.1 Introduction

TNS aims to give young people agency through a flexible system of practices, structures, and agreements that avoids imposing authoritarian rules and rigid operational structures. TNS operates with many pre-determined structures and practices such as timetabled classes, the use of sociocracy and the National Curriculum. However, although this standardisation exists across school and allows for structure in teaching and learning and predictability to the school day, there is also an important principle recognising that some operations and decisions can be revised. As such, adults and young people are invited to shape aspects of the school system and expectations of conduct. In this regard, 'self-made' community structures operate in tandem with standardised aspects, and have emerged in response to individual and collective circumstances over time. This flexibility of the system is driven by an 'experimental ethos', the principle of sociocracy and mechanisms for making agreements, such as circles and school council. The flexible system operationalises the relational and needs-based approach in practice and offers agency to both the individual and collective.

3.2 Key Findings

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 **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.

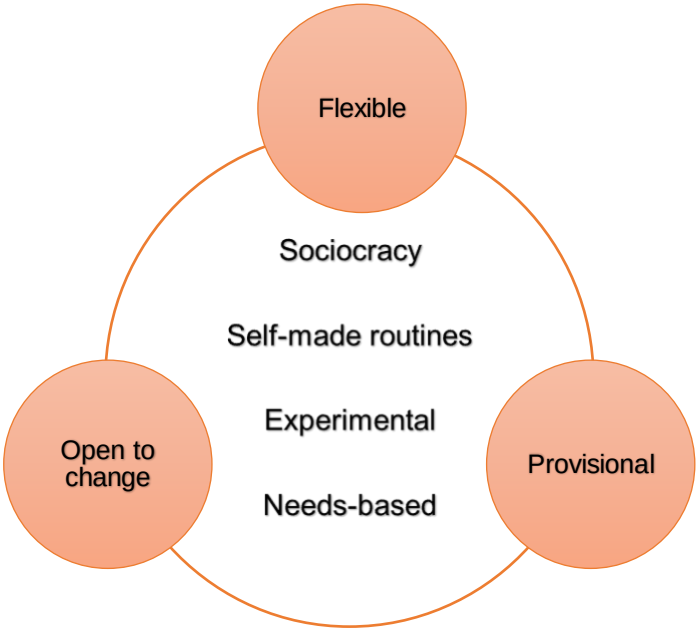

Figure 1: The key mechanisms that enable the flexible system at TNS. Macdonald & Oliver, 2024. ©

3.3 Using Agreements and Adapting to Needs

> '*You actually have an effect on the school. That's pretty neat. Teachers actually listen. They don't just say look at the board and think that solves everything' –* [young person, class 4]
>
> *'It's [TNS] democratic. Young people actually get a say in how to do things. That's doesn't happen much*' – [young person, class 3]

TNS operates a flexible and provisional approach in creating school practices, using the principle of sociocracy where all community members can express likes, dislikes, raise issues, and work to find collective solutions. Many of the adults and young people at TNS contrasted this with previous experience of mainstream settings, where they had felt diminished autonomy and observed authoritarian practices (see also Mills and McGregor 2014: 111).

Evidence:

- Sociocracy facilitates agreements around various aspects of school life. Where 'rules' might appear as prescriptive to outsiders, these are the result of consent-based discussion and negotiation. Agreements emerge organically out of practice and respond to day-to-day problems that might require class or community solutions.

- Agreements are made at a whole school level via the school council 'Time to Connect', and within specific classes via the use of sociocracy 'circles'. Repeated observations in ethnography illustrated that through careful processes of discussion, consultation and negotiation of individual and collective needs, young people and adults work together to co-produce new or

revised ‘ways of working’ that aim to balance *everyone’s* needs, rather than enforce externally imposed rules. Examples include sharing fruit arrangements (see Fig. 2), the use of fidget toys when listening (see Fig. 3) and the use of the whistle at break time (see Fig 4. and Case Study 1).

- By offering the community decision-making powers in the principle of sociocracy, TNS avoids prescription, and invites all members to shape the broader system. As a result, teachers expressed how the school adapted to *them*, rather than them having to ‘fit in’, indicating the way their agency was accommodated in dialogue with the broader, malleable school structure.

- By co-producing solutions through practice, members of the school community expressed that they are more likely to ‘buy in’ to solutions adopted, having developed them themselves. Where individuals are not satisfied nor happy with the outcomes (which is often the case), the fact that they have been consulted and gained understanding about how the agreement has developed, goes a long way to mitigate potential rejection of community agreed structures. This helps hold individual differences of opinion in a safe space and builds trust.

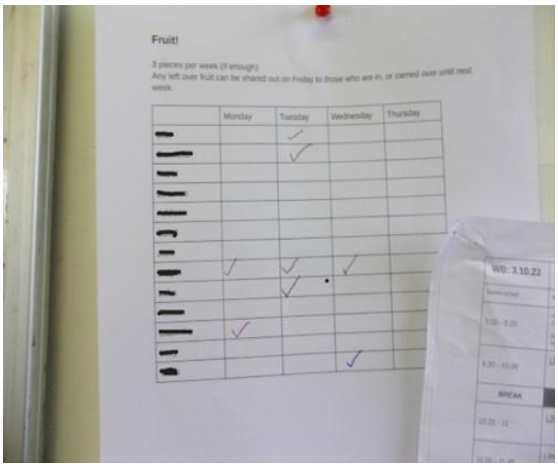

Figure 2: Fruit chart.
Photo credit:
Photovoice participant.

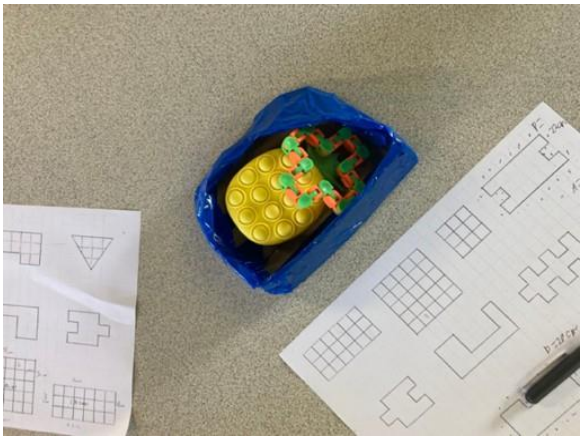

Figure 3: Fidget toy on a desk.
Photo credit:
Alison Macdonald

Figure 4: Whistle. Photo credit: Photovoice participant.

Case Study 1: Setting community agreements.

Adults use whistles at break time. Although this appears to be a more imposed mainstream practice, it emerged as a solution to a problem of getting all the children inside at the end of breaks. A teacher explained how this process was supported tacitly, because 'the kids came up with this ritual'. The use of whistles was agreed upon through conscious deliberation: '….now every staff member has a whistle because we all agreed as a school that that was going to be a solution to this problem of break time. So, it's like, these things were very intentional at the time that we were thinking about them. And now it's just automatically how we do things'. Moreover, it was observed in practice that there was still a very democratic use of the whistle. On one occasion, the teacher in the playground explained to two children around, as she finished their conversation, 'I'm going to blow the whistle three times and will you two shout 'it's time to go in'?'

3.4 Self-made Traditions and Routines

The development of self-made traditions, habits, and rituals also construct the flexible system, offering possibilities for agency, security, predictability and trust.

Evidence

- TNS members are able to build their preferences into school operations through cases where positive interactions or daily rituals between adults and young people become crystallised over time. Examples include class 'traditions' like watching Newsround (see Fig. 5), always taking shoes off outside the library (see Fig. 6), or developing processes such using a random name generator to choose who gets to do something, devised by young people who contested the principle of picking someone based on whose hand goes up first.

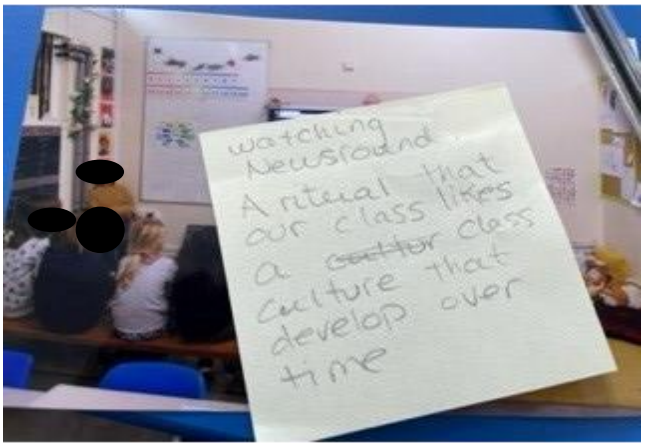

Figure 5: Watching Newsround. Caption and photo credit: Photovoice participant.

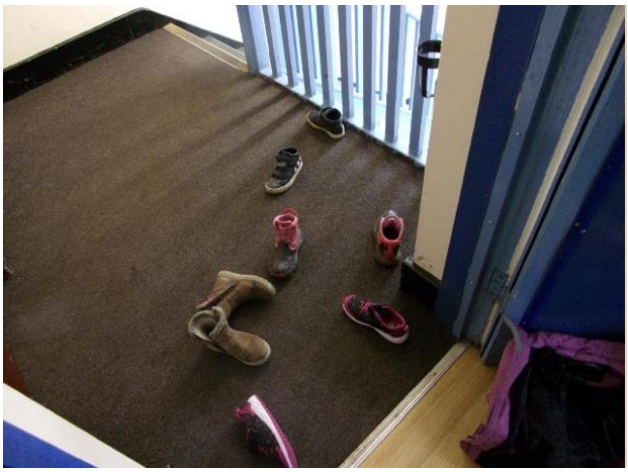

Figure 6: Shoes outside the library. Photo credit: Photovoice participant.

3.5 Experimental Ethos

Our data reveals that the school culture operates through an experimental ethos.

Evidence

- TNS was described as like 'a science experiment or a research project', 'experimental', 'playful' and a 'space for imagination' by teachers, who appreciated opportunities to be reflexive and self-manage their teaching methods, adapting their practice to the needs of their class and working at their discretion to make changes when something isn't working (see chapter 5) and self-directed learning for a major example of this). The experimental ethos also applies to wider school policies and practices, and teachers were regularly involved in innovating new and improved structures and processes for the school.

- Adults appreciated the openness to emotional expression (see Chapter 1) and the vulnerability that can emerge from experimentation, highlighting a rejection of the need to be the 'perfect' teacher in the performative domains of mainstream accountability regimes (cf. Ball 2003).

- Young people's playful and risky approach to learning and play (see Chapter 4) is also based on an encouragement to learn through experiences of experiment and failure. Many teachers create classroom culture that celebrates mistakes; '*we like mistakes'*, said one teacher to a young person.

'It's like messiness, good messiness is a part of the school's identity. And once you get involved in that process of upsetting things…challenging things, disrupting things, you have taken on a practice that is quite core'.

'I feel compared to my […] old school […] everything was – had to be perfect. Every display had to be like…the head teacher would take down displays….It feels like it's okay not to be perfect'.

3.6 Challenges of the Flexible System

Notwithstanding all the benefits of operating within a flexible system as outlined above, operating with flexibility is complex and can be challenging to navigate.

Evidence:

- Experimentation and flexibility create challenges around consistency, resulting from divergent interpretations of structures and differing application of practice by different staff members. This produces anxiety about 'everyone doing something different' and feeling uncertain or insecure about the 'right' or 'TNS' way to teach:

'*I mean, that's probably one of the problems with school is we've got lots of policies, but not everyone follows them'*.

'*Not all teachers agree to the same boundaries; different teachers do things differently. For example, swearing is ok with me'.*

- Adults expressed strong desire to have more time to share practices informally with each other to explore shared meanings of democratic education and develop areas for consistently applying democratic practice.

- Adults expressed concern about the long term feasibility of juggling a non-punitive needs-based approach that necessitates flexibility in structures and constant changes in practice with the priority to have some standardised structures, policies and targets across the school. In this regard, many adults felt like the school was trying to be both 'mainstream' and 'radical'. As a result, adults described the school as '*doing too much*' and having '*lots of moving parts*', highlighting high levels of exhaustion:

'*…you're all stretched…because you're kind of saying like you're trying to do everything? Like you're trying to be mainstream, but you're trying to be progressive and radical, but you're trying to do caring, but you're also trying to do GCSEs. Also, you know being helpful to kids with like autism, but also, you know, yeah, kids from working class, vulnerable backgrounds but also just regular middle-class kids who are just getting on. Like you've got all these different things that you're trying to do. I think it's the general feeling on the ground that the plates were spinning'.*

Chapter 4

Playing with Freedom

4.1 Introduction

Play is fundamental to early years' education because of its important role for human development. Our findings indicate that play at TNS has a much more expansive role than supporting early years' education or offering opportunities for breaks, and as such is given more importance within the school day and encouraged in specific ways. At TNS, play is often highly physical, tactile, and risky. It occurs more frequently across the school day, not restricted to demarcated times such as during 'break time' outdoors in the concrete and garden play areas but encouraged throughout lessons and other times of day. Moreover, all are involved; both young people and adults play - together and separately, in different ways across school. In this chapter we identify play within TNS as a set of multi-dimensional and open processes that serve specific functions, especially in supporting democratic and relational practice within the school.

4.2 Key Findings

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:
    - 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.
    - 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.

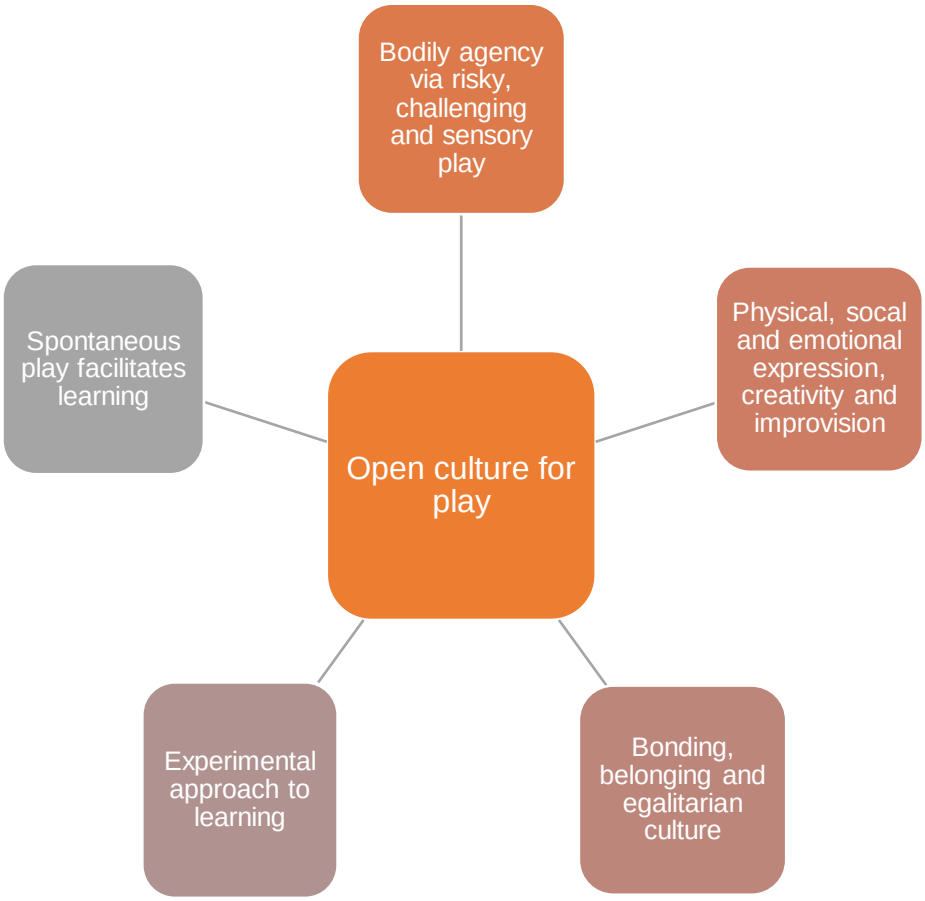

Figure 1: Open culture for play facilitates major pillars of democratic practice at TNS.

Macdonald & Oliver, 2024. ©

4.3 Open Culture for Play, Creativity, and Improvisation

In line with TNS's experimental approach, the school culture fosters open conditions for young people to engage freely play. Young people can play in physically uninhibited ways, to develop their own limits of personal safety, without being told where those limits should be. They are also able to engage in spontaneous creative and collaborative activities using a range of materials in their natural environment. Such open and uninhibited conditions for play provide space for authentic self-expression, and social and emotional exploration, which allows young people to act unrestricted on their feelings and interests.

Evidence:

- Young people's educational experience at TNS is characterised by regular opportunities for physical movement within personal limits. Young people consistently reported enjoying physically demanding or 'risky' activities during parkour or play time, such as '*doing flips off the stage*, '*climb[ing] things'* or '*hang[ing] from a climbing frame'* (see also Figs 2 & 3). Such conditions enable young people to develop their own limits of personal safety which unfold within boundaries of risk that are worked out in practice between adults and young people.

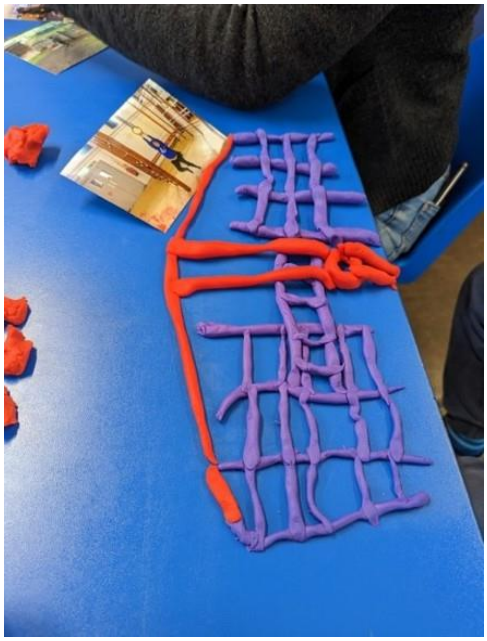

Figure 2: Playdough model of school gym. Photo credit: Photovoice participant.

Figure 3: Playing blinded folded. Photo credit: Photovoice participant.

- Young people repeatedly highlighted the importance of messy, explorative play in the natural environment regardless of weather conditions. A young person in photovoice commented that play is '*the garden, doing mud pies. Being young, having fun'*. Young people are often seen digging in the mud, playing with sticks and other materials found in the garden, and exploring plants and flowers. They are also found improvising with materials found around school such as working together to build a slide out of cardboard boxes or re-purpose a go-kart (see Fig. 4).

- Such opportunities facilitate creativity, resourcefulness, and self-expression. For example, a young person had an intense interest in playing with cardboard and expressed that their main interests in school were 'football, cardboard and tape'. During self-directed time, this young person experimented with cardboard and eventually made a time machine (see Fig. 5). Being able to aimlessly play around with cardboard and tape facilitated a creative opportunity; the young person was able to improvise with materials in an open-ended way. It also serves as a mode of self-expression because the young person was able to act upon intrinsically motivated interests around time travel.

- Adults noted that when given the responsibility for young people playing in experimental ways, they should also have some form of professional protection or 'safety' net to safeguard their position.

Figure 4: Go-kart. Photo credit: Photovoice participant.

Figure 5. Cardboard time machine. Photo credit: Photovoice participant.

4.4 Play, Relationships and Belonging

Play creates social bonds, building and solidifying relationships of a more egalitarian nature leading to feelings of comfort, safety, and belonging within the community, and a sense of responsibility to others.

Evidence:

- In both photovoice projects young people took hundreds of photos of their friends and the different ways they play together, and their analyses often illustrated how play can develop and sustain close relations between young people.

- Open and risky play facilitates cooperation and collaboration, as well as creating opportunities to test out and apply the democratic skills being learnt in school. For example, the group of young people who re-purposed some cardboard to make a slide in the playground were observed negotiating agreements about who can put up the slide and how many people can go down the slide at a time.

- There is natural collaboration based on interest in others' creativity and self-expression. For example, lots of participants from the photovoice project took images of the time machine that emerged out of one young person's intense interests (Fig. 5 above). This interest continued to develop as later in the school term the young person made a time capsule and invited their peers

and teachers to write messages about the school for the bottle.

- We observed young people experimenting with social relations and exploring power dynamics encountered in their everyday lives through the medium of play and imagination. An example includes the ‘coronation’ of a young person as king of the school. Young people were supported to produce materials e.g. a crown and were able to move furniture outside and invite the whole school to participate in the event. Everyone was ‘buying in’ to the game, and young people had different roles to play. The coronation was an exploration of extreme forms of power and control through a focus on dictatorship and monarchy.

- As per the human-centered approach, play is encouraged for adults too. Adults and young people were consistently observed engaging in board games, make-believe games, whole school ‘tag’ games and different types of role- plays. This is also marked out physically, for example as teachers get on the same level as young people by sitting on the floor together to play a game, such as chess or participate in an impromptu puppet show (see Fig.6). Adults expressed how working at the school permitted them to access their ‘inner child’, and relinquish inhibitions associated with socially conformist ideas about the authoritarian teacher who always displays serious and controlled behaviour.

- Teachers’ involvement in play signals to young people that adults in the school care about them and their interests and promotes feelings of connectedness. Young people were witnessed expressing joy about playing with their teachers.

Figure 6: Impromptu puppet show. Photo credit: photovoice participant

- Humour and joking are also important aspects of play that help to create feelings of insider belonging. As low-level chatter is generally accepted across many classes (Chapter 2), young people and adults were observed engaging in collective joking and banter, with some jokes having become ritualised within the class culture (See Case Study 1). As a result of being able to engage in joking behaviours with their teacher, young people develop an authentic relationship with them.

- Whilst it may seem like joking, silly chatter and interruption would detract from learning, ethnographic observations revealed that where young people were able to engage in low level chatter and exchange banter with each other and their teacher, they were also able to be productive with their work. Informal, joking interactions produce a level of respect that appears to validate the teacher's 'authority' in appropriate moments. For example, teachers were observed holding strong boundaries at times when the class needed to focus. In these moments, the class would respect the boundaries of the teacher.

Case Study 1: Joking Rituals
In one class there is an on-going class practical joke at the expense of the teacher. The teacher brought in a large, empty pickle jar to this class. Every time the teacher gets a young person's name confused, they must put money into the jar. This absolutely delights the class, who, on every occasion of confusion, heckle the teacher to put 20p into the jar. This is a reversal of standard punitive methods whereby instead of the young people, it is the adult who is 'disciplined' for their mistake. Young people in this class commented positively on such jokes, with one participant stating: 'Our teacher messes around with us which is good. He allows it. Having freedom [to joke openly] is good for any human being'.

4.5 Experimental Approach to Play in Learning

As seen in chapter 3, an open, experimental approach to play is supportive of learning, by enabling teachers to personalise their teaching, be creative and spontaneous with their methods and offer young people more agency in their learning. This is especially important at TNS where pedagogy is informed by 'stage not age' and classes compromise mixed age groups. Teachers at TNS make frequent use of games in teaching. Our research revealed an additional use of informal and spontaneous play in structured lessons i.e. maths and literacy in classes 2 and 3.

Evidence:

- The research revealed frequent examples of spontaneous, informal play in classrooms. For example, towards the end of a lesson in class 2 when some young people have either finished their work before their peers or have collectively completed a class task and have some time remaining, teachers will often offer young people the choice between an activity or 'find[ing] something to do' of their own. Young people were quick to full this time, and often by directly applying the skill they were just learning, for example, by setting up a shop to sell items using different denominations of money that they were just using in the maths lesson. This game was entirely child-led, unsupervised by an adult and lasted until young people were instructed by their teacher to tidy up for the end of the lesson.

- Teachers constantly tinker with their methods to try and give young people greater autonomy over their learning. These playful methods are pre-mediated and planned, but also occur in the moment, depending on how they are received and how the classroom and individuals 'feel'.

Chapter 5

Self-Directed Learning

5.1 Introduction

The final ingredient identified in TNS educational model is self-directed learning (SDL): a process where individuals are empowered to take responsibility for their own learning. Self-directed learning is not unique to the TNS, but TNS has developed its own way of organising self-directed time during the school day, as we outline here. Key to this is an individual plan ('my learning plan' - MLP) that young people devise with support from staff and parents to work on in self-directed time. This enables them to choose key goals to work on over a term and develop different types of skills. Our findings indicate that self-directed learning is one of the most valued aspects of TNS pedagogy and signals how well the practice is working to encourage young people's flourishing in the school.

SDL is also one of the most experimental sites of TNS practice, where teachers are free to adapt and develop new methods to meet the evolving needs of individuals and the collective. Over the research period, there were several changes to the organisation of self-directed learning. While this enhanced learner engagement in some areas, it also produced major tensions and ambiguities for both adults and young people. These sites of experimental practice are captured below. On the one hand, the organisation of SDL is illustrative of the school's commitment to a needs-based pedagogy and experimental ethos that embraces uncertainty and change in practice. On the other hand, some practices of SDL also point to tensions around consistency, accountability and structure on the one hand, and freedom, choice and flexibility on the other. As such, SDL at TNS is a major example of how to navigate high levels of self-directed choice whilst also striving to progress young people and hold them accountable to their learning.

5.2 Key Findings

1. While self-directed time implies individual learning, in fact **'togetherness'** is an important way of working for young people during self-directed 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 high degree of **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 absolute '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 (MLP), skills menu and progression grid in practice. Some young people raise concerns about **pressures associated with goal setting,** accountability and planning, advocating for **more flexibility and options to change their minds** in SDL.

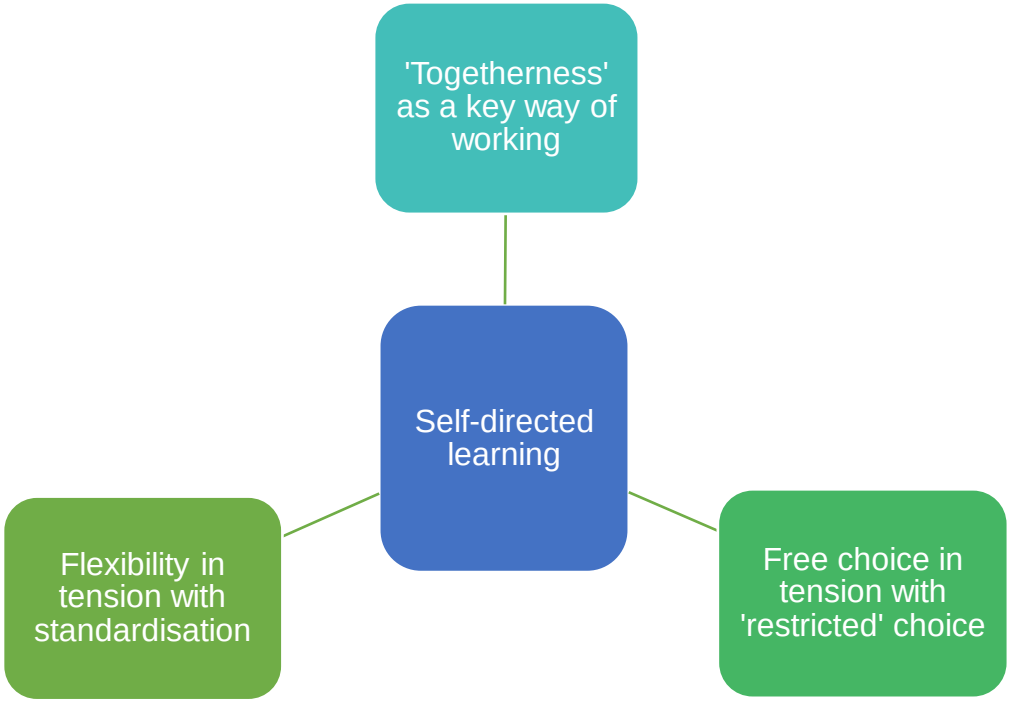

Figure 1: Processes defining self-directed learning at TNS. Macdonald & Oliver, 2024. ©

5.3 Togetherness in Self-directed Learning

Sharing in activities and socialising with friends is a fundamental feature of young people's experiences of SDL.

Evidence:

- Our observations reveal that SDL involves a common practice of 'working separately, but together', whereby young people work on independent activities, but do so in concert with their peers nearby and thereby share in each other's experiences of learning (see Fig. 2). This often entails sharing in and enjoying the development of each other's activities or offering to help where one young person is more proficient (see Fig. 3).

Figure 2: Working separately, but together. Photo credit: Photovoice participant.

Figure 3. Helping out with writing. Photo credit: Caroline Oliver

.

- Togetherness in SDL also includes what we term a 'swarm' effect, whereby young people will gather around interesting looking activities and become inspired to join in or develop them in new directions. Individuals often talk aloud, narrating their activities or offering streams of consciousness within a wider group dynamic. This can spark interest amongst other young people who respond to their questions or comment. This collective 'call and response' contributes to classroom polyvocality in SDL and encourages opportunities for inspiration, to try new activities, build confidence and collaborate with different peers. A teacher commented on this process in Fig. 4 below, noting the young people became '*joined by the interest of drawing. Both discovered a new connection, and they are given the space to explore it'.*

Figure 4: 'Joined by the interest of drawing'. Photo credit and caption: Photovoice participant

5.4 Choice, Freedom and Boundaries

> *I like in self-directed time I can do pretty much anything, and I can do things from MLP* – young person, class 2
>
> *I like self-directed time because I can pursue my interests of science and chess* – young person, class 4

Young people at TNS value self-directed learning because of the high degree of freedom to pursue their own personal interests and the opportunity to choose their own activities. Young people also highlighted the importance of having independence to manage their own work, be creative or have '*me time*' in which they can relax. However, many young people expect to be able to have absolute free choice in SDL and this sits in tension with adults re-directing their choice due to resource limitations or to support intentional learning in a wide range of skills.

Evidence:

- Young people engage in a wonderfully wide range of activities in SDT, but there are some natural, or inevitable limits to the range of activities in SDT. These arise chiefly because choices need to be accessible within existing resources in the school, especially staff time, where there are not always enough adults available to accommodate all of the young people's desires. These limitations can be a source of frustration: A young person from class 4 commented, '*SDL is annoying because I can't do physical activity, like I want to basketball, boxing or MMA, but I can't'.* Additionally, many of the young people used photovoice to document their unfulfilled desires to spend more time outside during SDL, which is currently not permitted due to staff resourcing (see Fig. 5).

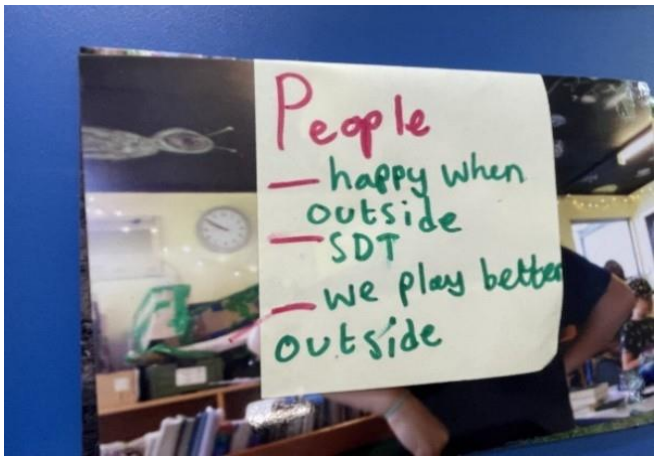

Figure 5: More self-directed time (SDT) outside.
Photo credit: Alison Macdonald

- SDL is organised through a specific framework for learning designed by adults in the school: having a defined goal, involving an identifiable skill, and having intent to learn. All adults recognise these factors and try to implement them using tools developed within the school e.g. My Learning Plan (MLP), the Skills Menu and the progression grid. Ultimately, young people's choices for SDL must be justifiable to an adult according to these adult-led principles and this can generate a mismatch between young people's expectations of 'free choice' and the reality of encountering an adult-led boundary around their choice.

- Classroom observations reveal that adults sometimes felt that a young person was using SDL to engage in an unsuitable activity, opening a dialogue with them about why that activity was not suitable and suggest other options in the process of starting to negotiate a boundary around their choice. For example, when a young person wanted to play a computer game, the teacher commented, '*that is something you can do at home*'. Where a young person repeated the same activity over and over, an adult would encourage them '*to be more intentional about their choice for SDL'* and try something different. When a young person appeared to be doing something 'idle' (playing with cardboard and tape), an adult asked, '*is this a good use of your time*?'. Finally, when a group of young people were found sitting together compiling a play list for a birthday party, two adults queried their activity, asking, 'd*o you think this is the best use of SDL time*?' Further stating, '*I don't want to be too hard line or strict, but it's not really an SDL activity*' and '*it's something that is not supporting your learning*'.

- As per the points above, boundary holding and negotiation is more intensively required in SDL than in other classes. One adult described their role in SDL as a '*boundary manager'.* Adults grappled with an emotional dilemma over wanting to facilitate a young person's freedom (i.e. their interests, choice, comfort, creativity, play and socializing) whilst also conforming to adult-led policies and tools for SDL learning (as outlined above). Finding this balance was especially difficult when it came to engaging in games like chess or football, which are skillful and thereby fitting with SDL principles, but are also forms of sociable play that are perhaps experienced more as 'hanging out' for comfort than learning. When redirecting young people's activities, adults expressed their discomfort about doing so. One stated, '*We are needs-based everywhere else, but ironically in self-directed time it all of sudden goes out the window ... it becomes less needs focused; pushing them towards doing something else if I don't think it's appropriate'.*

- There is variance across classes in relation to adult intervention for SDL. It is notable that in class 2 young people are generally less resistant to adult-led principles of SDL. This could be age-related and associated with more blurring of lines between play / learning at this age, but it could also be because young people there are given additional time within their timetables for free play – for example, a 'play period' for someone's birthday or simply periods of 'quiet time'. Carving out other, explicit spaces for young people to have free choice in class time might support young people in classes 3 and 4 to engage in more structured learning in SDL.

5.5 Structure, Flexibility and Progression

Although all adults are aware of school frameworks to support SDL (MLP, the skills menu and progression grid), the use and interpretation of such frameworks varies across classes, and differences in opinion exist around their value in facilitating intrinsic motivation and learning. This raises issues of consistency in practice and adults grapple to commit to their flexible needs-based approach whilst also trying to make SDL more consistent within the school, noting a deep responsibility to want to support young people to progress their skillset and be accountable for their learning.

Evidence:

- MLPs help to structure SDL and support young people who find it 'overwhelming' to have too much choice and subsequently don't know what to do and '*feel lost*'. Lots of young people value MLPs and planning. One young person in class 4 expressed how much they enjoy SDL because they can get on with their maths at their own pace and according to their own needs, so it doesn't get boring. Another young person in class 4 stated, '*MLP is good because like you need to practice guitar and if you do that for 10 mins every day that's good*'. Young people in the photovoice project also singled out the MLP as something they enjoyed about SDL, as a way of giving structure and marking achievement.

- Ethnographic observations also reveal there is often a reluctance from young people (mainly classes 3 and 4) to sit and discuss their MLP with their teachers. They expressed feelings of being rushed or pushed to meet their goals, and highlighted difficulties around balancing different types of interests: short term interests included momentary likes of the day, and long-term interests referred to more sustained interests and projects. Being able to chop and change your short and long term interests according to preference was important for young people, as one participant commented, '*If I feel like doing extra maths then I might plan that, but then on the day maybe I feel distracted or have a new idea for my story and I need to write it down …'* Young people's moods or feelings would impact their impulse to learn or engage in certain activities.

- Some young people thus had difficulties in engaging with longer-term commitments planned in their SDL; one teacher commented, the young people have '*avoidance strategies'* because they '*are not invested in the MLP'.* This leads to frustration for all involved. Teachers mused how they might either (a) embed more flexibility e.g. through regular check in and revision of goals and '*find a way to take them forward. Moving with them, rather than constantly pulling them back'* to previous goal setting, or (b) create different structures to enhance young people's accountability for their choices.

- Teachers acknowledged challenges in actively tracking progress in SDL using school systems such as a ‘skills menu’ and ‘progression grid’. There was some confusion about how to do this in practice, especially around how to track progress in a systematic way, when there are a diversity of interests and activities taking place at any one time, or whether they should be measuring progress towards or achievement of a skill. Teachers also identified an issue of inclusion with tracking, noting ‘*Planning needs to be age appropriate- it doesn’t work for all people... unsettling as it is, yes, progress will not look the same, and it will be very non-linea*r'. Some also felt that SDL should be more in line with anti-assessment principles, and whether SDL was ‘too tightly’ managed, with suggestions to explore how the school can *‘democratise self-directed time’.*

Conclusion

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. Though identified separately, the report shows they work in complementary and overlapping ways:

The first aspect of TNS pedagogy is 'relational practice', where fostering relations based on 'connection' rather than 'control' to foster egalitarian and caring relationships is fundamental to all social and learning dynamics. Relational practice is supported through a human-centered and needs- based pedagogy that operates through a non-punitive ethos where young people's needs are understood holistically and there is work undertaken to assist all school members to work from a principle of emotional literacy (regulation, repair etc.). Relational practice serves to cultivate positive relationships, with much care given to setting and holding boundaries around behaviours and diverse needs as opposed to using punishments. This is perceived to help maintain healthy interpersonal relationships and individual wellbeing for all in the school community.

The second key ingredient is attention to the multisensory experience of schooling. Rather than seeing sensory needs (such as the need to move one's body, eat, drink etc.), as potentially disruptive, TNS understands meeting sensory needs as central preconditions to learning. Finding ways to meet and negotiate diverse preferences (including those of adults) creates a positive learning environment, and facilitates young people's bodily agency in learning. This ingredient also reflects TNS's relational, human-centered and needs-based approach which underpins their democratic and inclusive pedagogy.

The third aspect is TNS' flexible system of practices, structures, and agreements. The flexible system operationalises the relational and needs-based approach in practice. Drawing on the key principle of sociocracy, TNS operates a consent-based culture where adults and young people together shape the school system, operations, practices, and expectations of conduct. Structures are flexible and provisional; some are pre-determined, and others are 'self-made' soft structures that come from emergent traditions and routines. All are subject to an understanding that rules, decisions, and practices are agreed, rather than imposed, whose origins are clear and that they can be revised. Flexibility is driven by an 'experimental ethos' as well as practiced mechanisms for making agreements, such as 'circles' and school council. Flexibility is driven by commitment to experimentation. TNS encourages a spirit of learning by trying, allowing room for failure in the search for solutions. Inevitably such an approach can by its nature be complex, time intensive and challenging, and teachers expressed a wish for more time to share practices to overcome the insecurity of having fewer standardised practice than in other schools. Yet whilst time-consuming, this ingredient is also essential for egalitarian relationship building and co-constructing predictable, yet responsive learning environments.

The fourth ingredient refers to the centrality of play at TNS. There is an open approach to play, where play is experienced as highly physical, tactile, and risky, more frequent, and involving both young people and adults. Our evidence suggests

that play has specific functions in supporting democratic and relational practice within the school. It helps to facilitate physical and social forms of creativity, improvisation, learning through the natural environment and via engagement with a variety of school materials. It helps young people decide themselves limits and responsibilities. Play facilitates relationships and bonding, providing opportunities for collaboration, self-expression, learning emotional skills by testing out social scenarios and disrupting hierarchies. Play is in-built into the classroom experience, enabling self-directed opportunities to enhance young people's agency in everyday learning. However, while welcomed, play can create social tensions, which need time-consuming and labour-intensive care and support. Adults also noted that when given the responsibility for young people playing in experimental ways, they should also have some form of protection or 'safety' net to safeguard their position.

The final ingredient identified in TNS pedagogic practice is Self-directed learning (SDL), where individuals are empowered to take responsibility for their own learning and one of the most valued aspects of TNS pedagogy. Young people work with support to devise an individual plan ('my learning plan' - MLP) to identify goals and skills to work on. Although SDL implies individual choice, it is characterised by togetherness, where young people share in each other's learning experiences. SDL also therefore functions to strengthen relationships by producing caring and comfortable dynamics in the classroom. As SDL is an experimental arena in school practice, it is characterised by some ambiguities and tensions, which are the subject of ongoing reflection to enhance practice. Chiefly there are tensions around young people's expectations of 'free choice' in SDL (and desires for instance to spend more time outdoors) and adults re-directing choice, especially in the context of limited resources. This relates to tensions about what TNS defines as a skill, learning activity and 'productive' use of time, as well as how or if they should be measured.

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 report ends therefore with a series of recommendations (page 47) co-produced with community members – adults and young people from TNS - and informed by research findings.

Recommendations

	School Practice	Recommendation
1.	Democratic Education	Relational practice at the TNS compromising a human-centered, non-punitive and needs based pedagogy is the bedrock of TNS model, informing all aspects of teaching, learning and community building. It should feature more centrally in TNS's presentation and dissemination of their version of democratic education.
2.	TNS claims to be child-led (website and school documents)	We identify that 'human-centered' better describes TNS approach which strives to put young people and adults at the heart of its community, celebrating the uniqueness of all individuals and aiming to respect and meet their needs.
3.	Pastoral principles (section 1.3)	The current focus on the pastoral presents this as something additional to TNS pedagogy. Instead, we recommend proceeding with a model that has the pastoral baked in from the start, centering the work of relational practice as the fundamental driver of a caring and democratic school system.
4.	Relational practice (chapter 1)	Consider producing guidelines for relational practice as a 'way of working' to (a) support new staff members who are being inducted into the school and (b) consider producing guidelines for transferable practice to replicate TNS model in other settings.
5.	Non-punitive principles and holding boundaries (chapter 1)	The non-punitive is a fundamental pillar of TNS relational and democratic model. Consider developing guidelines on how to implement non-punitive measures, including how to hold boundaries within a framework of responsible freedom using principles developed in Chapter 1, to assist new staff and produce guidelines for transferable practice to replicate TNS model in other settings.
6.	Egalitarian relationships between adults (section 1.4)	Although TNS operates with consent-based structures and egalitarian ethos, hierarchy still exists amongst adults. It is therefore important to be mindful that achieving egalitarian power dynamics requires intentional, reflexive work to keep them balanced in all areas of practice. This is especially the case where decision- making processes occur outside of formal circle settings.
7.	Reflective Practice (section 1.6)	Adults at TNS do not currently feel supported by reflective practice; it is currently viewed by many as 'unsafe' and not a neutral space. Whilst adults value the purpose of reflective practice, we recommend the school community review how it is organised and delivered.

8.	TNS primarily promotes its democratic model through 'student voice', highlighting how young people are recognised and participate in decision-making structures as equals (website).	TNS promotes a more substantial democratic culture in ways other than through student 'voice'; especially through recognising and responding to diverse multisensory preferences and emotions to scaffold learning. Young people are afforded bodily agency and are invited to co-create their learning environments according to sensorial need.
9.	TNS website states it tries to create: "a truly inclusive learning environment that celebrates difference. We work to create a caring, respectful community that acknowledges and values all young people for who they are".	Inclusivity at TNS could be fleshed out to be more specific about how this is achieved in practice, for example, by implementing a human-centered and needs based pedagogy, underpinned by flexible practices and structures.
10.	The flexible system (chapter 3)	As this summary has shown, a needs-based pedagogy requires a high degree of flexibility in practice. The flexible system is therefore enabling of adults' and young people's autonomy in practice. Recognising and acknowledging more explicitly this system as a key mechanism of democratic practice at TNS is important to reassure adults about the validity of this way of working. At the same time, high degrees of flexibility also make consistency and standardization challenging. Consider recognising this fact explicitly and explore how the school might be more discerning in its use of flexibility for productivity. For example, identifying specific areas of practice where flexibility is essential (and formalise this as a flexible way of working), and scoping out other areas where practice and processes could be given more concrete shape.
11.	Challenges of the flexible system (section 3.6)	Working in a constantly changing and adaptive system is very labour intensive and exhausting. Consider wider community consultation about how to manage the pressures of working in an evolving environment, exploring how staff can be better cared for and supported to manage these pressures and maintain their wellbeing while working towards the aims of the school.

12.	Experimental approach 1 (section 3.5)	Celebrate and make explicit the experimental approach used in TNS. In many cases, the school's ways of working are emergent, becoming crystallized and refined in practice over time. This is enabling of autonomy as adults can improvise and change their teaching methods depending on needs of individuals and the collective. At the same time, working with experimentation can also create anxiety and uncertainty. To address this, TNS could celebrate more its experimental mission, whereby variety is integral to TNS practice. By being explicit about this, adults may feel supported to feel more comfortable in the discomfort of the experimental.
13.	Experimental approach 2 (section 3.6)	Adults consistently expressed a desire to reflect on their experimental and evolving practice with other staff members. Adults want to share experiences of different 'ways of working', learn from each other and find more support in their collectively shared responsibility to craft the system and practices of TNS. Consider carving out space to encourage adults to reflect more on their experimenting, and do this collaboratively, to discuss and share democratic teaching practices and identify areas of practice where experimentation can be maximized.
14.	Experimental approach 3 (section 4.3)	TNS encourages adults to experiment in their practice and to support young people in a wide variety of activities (e.g. risky physical play, self-expression when frustrated). Adults asked for appropriate support structures to enable them to feel fully confident and safe in supporting the young people and experimenting in flexible ways. Some examples raised by several adults include building in space to reflect on and discuss challenging situations, and for staff to identify where within an anti-hierarchical structure, they can seek and find advice. Suggestions put forward for further discussion and consideration included mentoring, coaching and/or union membership.
15.	Open conditions for play 1 (section 4.3)	Protect and expand open conditions for play for young people, exploring ways to support increased opportunities to spend time playing and learning outdoors, as well as building in further possibilities for adults to have playful social interactions with each other.
16.	Open conditions for play 2 (chapter 4)	We have identified open conditions for play as central to TNS democratic practice. Consider supporting staff to embrace these methods and formalise them into sets of practice for democratic education. Additionally, consider producing guidelines for transferable practice to replicate TNS model in other settings.

17.	Social dynamics of self-directed learning (section 5.3)	Protect and expand opportunities for 'togetherness' in SDL, and especially outdoors, where young people would like to spend more time during SDL and have opportunities to mix with other age groups. As togetherness is a key ingredient of SDL, consider producing some guidance on how this way of working supports TNS pedagogy to maximise its benefits more explicitly.
18.	Choice in SDL and other learning (section 5.4)	Consider if there is scope and appetite to clarify the role of choice in SDL. Consider if choice could be presented more explicitly as having restrictions, or explore where more flexibility could be integrated into adult- led frameworks. More widely, consider exploring how different contexts and tasks can involve or necessitate differing degrees of choice and freedom to self-direct learning. This is already happening across the school via experimental and playful pedagogy.
19.	Structuring SDL (section 5.5)	Review the current structures in place for supporting SDL. This could include reviewing the purpose and structure of MLP (reflecting how some young people or teachers at times, are not excited nor motivated by it). Consider reducing the goal down to one per term or consider other forms of goal setting and planning that allow for flexibility, as in line with other school structures and practices.
20.	Skills menu in SDL (section 5.5)	Consider broadening SDL's skills menu to include softer skills of experimentation, creativity, and collaboration, especially since so many young people engage in collaborative and creative activities for SDL as a feature of 'togetherness'.
21.	Resourcing SDL (section 5.3)	Explore how to provide further resources for SDL– young people want to do more activities that require adult supervision and adults want more support to meet the young people's needs.

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