

Seeds of a New Society: The Seychelles National Youth Service (NYS) as a Prefigurative Form for Mental Health and Wellbeing

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Commentary

At the invitation from the editor of the Journal of Mental Health Disorders, the following commentary reflects on the possible ways in which a radical and progressive model of secondary education—the Seychelles National Youth Service—held out the prospect of changing the conditions for mental health and wellbeing of Seychellois people, both young and old. This invitation was prompted by the editor's reading of an essay I wrote entitled 'The Seychelles National Youth Service (NYS): Fragments, Thoughts and Reflections on an Experiment in Democratic Education' for an edited collection entitled *Designing Democratic Schools and Learning Environments a Global Perspective* [1].

I have written these reflections not as any kind of specialist, scholar or clinician in matters of mental health, but as someone who, as Advisor to the NYS, was actively involved in its early formation between 1980 and 1981. The perspectives I bring to this writing are shaped by a lifetime working both as a teacher/academic in sociology and theatre studies and as a professional performer and theatre maker. I start by briefly summarizing what the NYS aspired to be, how it began to work in practice during its early years and the wider context of a colonized Seychelles, only becoming an independent republic in 1976. More copious accounts of the NYS, its genesis and unfolding practice can be found not only in my essay in the *Designing Democratic Schools* collection, but more expansively on the website—*The Living Library* [2]—dedicated to Robin Murray (1940–2017). I follow this contextual introduction with reflections upon how selected aspects of NYS pedagogies and structures aspired explicitly or indirectly to engage with the mental wellbeing of its students.

The NYS was the brainchild of the newly elected President, France Albert René and his government, which had come to power after a coup in 1977. Based on the apparently simple premise that the creation of a post-colonial socialist society had particularly to focus on the education of its young people—'seeds of a new society'—the NYS was to become the vehicle for this transformation. Early in 1979, René's government enlisted strategic advice from two progressive academics—Olivier Le Brun and Robin Murray—in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex. Le Brun and Murray were heavily engaged in conversations with the President and key politicians in René's government and their paper *The National Youth Service of Seychelles: the Seed of a New Society* had the purpose of opening up perspectives to inform the creative debate taking place in the country. Nevertheless, The Seed also contained a series of concrete proposals around the possible structure of the NYS and the ethos, which might guide it.

The NYS was to offer full-time residential education for all 15–17 year olds. It was to unfold in phases across several purpose-built 'villages', the first of which from 1980 was at Port Launay on Mahé, the largest island in the Seychelles' archipelago. These villages or camps, each with permanent domestic, social and learning structures would be 'where the children would have the opportunity to discover new ways of learning, working and playing together' [3]. For the purpose of this writing, I particularly discern an accent on 'discovery', 'playing' and 'together'. Pedagogically and politically, each of these terms offers a glimpse of the force fields, which might drive and shape the emerging NYS. The pedagogy was to be resolutely heuristic—learning through doing; thinking and reflection always in active conversation with practice, whether

this be in animal husbandry, making culture, producing a village newspaper, designing and building spaces or in farming. Hubert Murray [4], suggests that it is possible that the authors' ideas around pedagogy were shaped by the radical French pedagogue, Célestin Freinet (1896–1966) who proposed the unity of head and hand as a form of liberated education [5]. Famously, he folded reading and writing instruction into the material reality of printing production [4].

Within their time at the NYS, students were to begin living democratic and imaginatively respectful lives, that would become the practices—tools for living—which they would carry into adult life and the world beyond the NYS. Even from this brief overview, it is clear that for the NYS project, democracy and democratic processes were never simply to be procedural matters of electing student representatives onto various committees at different levels of village life. Such structures would be put into place, but the democratic heft was to be embedded in daily practice, to run across, down and through every aspect of the student experience: a rooted behavioral disposition to govern human relationships: 'new ways of learning, working and playing together' [3].

A three-week pilot project in August/September 1980—an 'experimental holiday camp'—tested out some of the precepts, ideas, and practices with almost 500 young Seychellois volunteers and undertook initial training with older animateurs who had already been selected to work on the Port Launay site. The NYS at Port Launay eventually opened in February 1981 with about 800 pupils. The village was staffed by teachers from within the Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Britain, Belgium, Guinea-Conakry, Mauritius and Canada (largely from French speaking Quebec). Alongside this group, a team of Seychellois animateurs—often not much older than the children themselves—assisted the teachers and were responsible for overseeing the domestic and social life of the village. On reflection, the animateurs were hugely significant in shaping the social, cultural and psychological health of the village. Unlike the teachers, they were all Seychellois and—arguably—had a much stronger feel for (and identity with) the aspirations, pleasures, uncertainties and anxieties of the pupils. The whole project was led and managed by a committee of experienced staff, each with responsibilities for different aspects of village life. Except for myself and Olivier Le Brun, all these were Seychellois and the overall project was led by Florence Benstrong. The boys and girls were housed in 18 single sex but paired 'clusters' (48 in each), whilst classroom teaching was to take place in a study center with 16 classrooms, three laboratories and a clinic. The curriculum was delivered through a modular system of courses known as 'blocks', each one blending education with production and theory with practice. Alongside these seven 'blocks'—Health, Animal Husbandry, Fishing, Culture, Crops, Information and Construction/Technology, Maths, English and French were taught as core curriculum.

In the context of this essay, and before beginning to tease out more explicitly some of the characteristics of the NYS which attempted to engage with issues of mental health and wellbeing, it is important to reiterate that the ambitious goal of the NYS was to remove hierarchies of knowledge and learning, to challenge fundamentally the belief that some children only need technical/vocational education whilst others deserve more exalted and valorized 'academic' modes of learning. Furthermore, the NYS was to confront the very binary that divides effective learning between thinking and doing. In other words, you think more creatively and expansively through a combination of thought and action, and your actions will always be more productive when they are combined with reflection, reasoning and analysis.

These were the main theoretical force fields and pedagogic structures, which drove and shaped the NYS in its early years. Before reflecting more deeply on these in relation to mental health I want to consider the wider context of all this, taking place in a newly independent country which had been colonized by both the British and the French for over 200 years. Here I draw upon the life and work of iconic anti-colonial revolutionary and psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon who positioned the mental traumas and psychological suffering of Algerian people firmly in the context of their experience as colonized subjects. Fanon was a complex man and his practice as clinician and psychiatrist sometimes sits uneasily with his uncompromising rage as an activist within the struggle for an independent Algeria, free politically, culturally and psychologically from its French masters. However, for Fanon, much of the mental suffering and trauma experienced by his patients in the North African hospital wherein he worked could be at least partially rooted in the alienating conditions in which they lived under French rule. In his masterful biography of Fanon, *The Rebel's Clinic* [6] Adam Shatz writes of Fanon's patients like this:

"What he saw in their faces, and in their physical and psychological distress, were people who had been deprived of freedom and forcibly alienated from themselves, from their ability to come to grips with reality and act upon it independently. Some of them were mentally ill ... others were immigrant workers or colonized Algerians who suffered from hunger, poor housing, racism and violence; still others suffered from performing the dirty work of colonial repression ... What they shared was an invisible, lacerating anguish inscribed in the psyche, immobilizing both body and soul. This anguish, for Fanon, was a kind of dissident knowledge: a counter-narrative to the triumphal story that the West told about itself [6]."

Fanon repeatedly pointed out that colonial regimes were founded upon violence, 'the conquest of the indigenous populations, the theft of their land, the denigration of their cultures' languages and religions' [6]. He coined the term

‘disalienation’ to describe the arc of the psychiatric treatment he researched and tried to practice as a doctor in France and Algeria [7,8]. This ‘disalienation’ Shatz identifies as the ‘careful dismantling of psychological obstacles to an unfettered experience of selfhood that opens onto a broader project for mental well-being of oppressed communities’ [6]. In the final chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* entitled ‘Colonial War and Mental Disorders’ Fanon offers sensitive and detailed portraits of men and women scarred and deeply harmed by their experience of colonial oppression and war [9]. I find the perspectives on mental health and well-being articulated and practiced by Fanon as a useful prism through which to think about the deeper objectives, experiences and understandings with which the Seychelles NYS was wrestling. I am not suggesting any rigid parallels between the colonization and independence struggles of Algeria and Seychelles and there is, of course, danger in a crude reductionism when making such comparisons. Whilst Seychelles’ transition to an independent republic was non-violent in the sense of an absence of war—unlike Algeria and many other African countries—the people of Seychelles had experienced the disempowering governance of European nations since 1770 when the country was formally annexed to France [3]. Seychelles was officially ceded to Britain through the Treaty of Paris in 1814, but despite being under British rule for over 160 years until independence in 1976 [3], French cultural influence on Seychellois life was still palpable when I worked there in the early 1980s. Moreover, under this colonialism there was, of course, always violence, an example of which was the prohibition on speaking and writing the native Creole (Kreol) Seychellois language [4,10]. Kreol was the domestic and vernacular tongue of the Seychelles in the home, at work and at play. Prior to the NYS if a child was heard speaking Kreol in the classroom they would be beaten with a stick. ‘In this way the colonial authority alienated children from each other, all in the service of conforming to the language of the governing class’ [4]. Gay Lee, who worked as a teacher and nurse in the NYS, remembers:

“I did feel making Kreol an official and ubiquitous first language was a very important part of increasing the self-esteem of people who had been under the thumb of slavery, a really important contribution to increasing self-confidence and cultural identity in the students a great equalizer [10].”

Fanon’s life as a practicing psychiatrist and revolutionary offers an illuminating perspective to help frame the NYS’s goals as a project to emancipate the young people of Seychelles, to open up the possibilities of different forms and practices for human well-being and relationships. Although Le Brun and Murray’s *The Seed of a New Society* rarely speaks explicitly of mental health and illness, I would argue that many of the practices and assumptions espoused in the early days of the NYS attend—optimistically perhaps—to such concerns and behaviors.

The ethos and overarching aims of the NYS were to be key elements in the transformation of Seychelles from a stratified, profoundly unequal and undereducated society [3] to one based on socialist economic principles and practices where economic, cultural and psychological flourishing were no longer the rewards of a privileged and powerful few. The NYS was to be a means to this ambitious and utopian goal, but also an end in itself—a prefigurative form for a new society of equal and democratic relationships across every sphere of social life—in work, in the domestic domain, in learning, in relationships and in leisure. The pedagogical, domestic and social structures of everyday life in an NYS village were shaped so as to nurture respectful, non-exploitative relationships between boys and girls, to build personal and collective self-confidence and to explore ways of learning no longer predicated on valorizing the ‘head’ over the ‘hand’, the academic over the practical or technical. These ambitious goals were to be taught not as abstract ethical principles but through the lived practice of learning, of organizing everyday tasks in and around the clusters, of planning and executing social, sporting, and cultural activities and through all the challenging complexities of democratic decision-making. A few months before the NYS officially opened, the Government produced a booklet for all Seychellois, explaining what it would do, how it would work and to allay anxieties and fears. To the question, “What is meant by “Service?” the booklet’s answer was:

“Above all the young will be developing a new type of person and creating new ways of doing things, which will serve as models for the country as a whole. They will be the seed of the new society. It is for this reason that we call it a service and not just a school [11].”

Before considering some aspects of the NYS in more detail, it is worth pausing to suggest how these objectives and practical strategies and structures might engage with the positioning of this commentary in a publication entitled the “Journal of Mental Health Disorders”. As I am not a mental health specialist, I can only be tentative in articulating these propositions, and I must, of course, be clear that I understand the term ‘mental health disorders’ to cover a multitude of behaviors, symptoms and causes. However, both inchoately at the time of my working in the Seychelles, but more acutely now, 45 years on, I have a strong sense that underlying all the proposed practices of the NYS was the attempt to create conditions whereby these young people might ‘learn’ to flourish socially, psychologically, personally and collectively. Flourishing is a complex condition, and all too often simply connotes the acquisition of wealth and successful entrepreneurialism. I want to derail this meaning here and, following cultural theorist, Terry Eagleton, suggest that the psychological conditions or circumstances for wellbeing and flourishing are generated socially and relationally. In *After Theory* [12] in a chapter entitled ‘Truth, Virtue and Objectivity’ Eagleton writes:

"The word 'flourishing' may carry rather virile, strenuous, red-faced connotations for us, but it need not do so. It includes, say, showing mercy or sympathetic listening. We need to take the idea of flourishing out of the gym. We live well when we fulfil our nature as an enjoyable end in itself. Since our nature is something we share with other creatures of our kind, morality is an inherently political matter [12]."

With Eagleton, I would suggest that flourishing is not the same as being happy, nor is it simply the product of individual achievement or measured by a feeling of interiority. Essentially, 'flourishing' can be enabled by and through events, behaviors and conditions which rather than feeding our individual egos, 'de-center' us, and which play to our ability to be 'disinterested' (not the same as uninterested). We are likely to flourish when we are collectively making and sharing an experience. The NYS in its aspirations, its ethos and in its very practical and concrete plans offered the conditions and circumstances whereby the young people of Seychelles might flourish and enjoy the possibility of mental wellbeing. A set of practices, experiences and possibilities far removed from the divisive, oppressive and punitive 'disorders' of life under colonial rule. Recently a UNESCO research project with University College London in 2022 examined how education can contribute to and support human flourishing [13]. The report implicitly concurs with many of the principles and precepts espoused 40 years earlier in the NYS.

To return to some selected examples of NYS teaching, learning and domestic living. The NYS aspired to reunite work, daily life and education. Conventional ways of teaching and learning were to be reduced to a minimum. Production units would replace the classroom, at least as a way of reimagining and reconfiguring (quite practically) the processes of learning, making and sustainability within the camp. Teachers were attached to various modes of activity in which the projects were being carried out. As Le Brun explained:

"The acquisition of knowledge and skills was linked to production. Thus, for example, in physics, optics was taught from photography, and acoustics in the context of the radio station; in biology, theoretical knowledge was built up through the volunteers' experience of agricultural activities (including animal husbandry and fishing) and of cooking and healthcare practice. Intellectual work and manual labor were intertwined, and education was directly integrated into production and domestic life [14]."

Underlying these programs was the belief that these pedagogical strategies would challenge traditional workplace and educational hierarchies and offer the possibility of greater individual fulfilment—or flourishing—for the young people involved. Conversely, NYS educational strategies sought to moderate and reconfigure what in more traditional learning systems would be regarded as individual failure with all its

potentially crippling psychological consequences for self-confidence, self-worth and self-belief. But within this paradigm was also the implicit understanding that the conditions for mental wellbeing were crucially a relational matter, that undertaking tasks and problem solving—whether intellectual or more pragmatic and concrete—were more likely to be psychologically and socially rewarding when practiced as a collective, communal and cooperative enterprise.

It was within the domestic sphere of camp life that the processes of transformation were perhaps most challenging and rewarding but most likely to engage with the practices of mental health and wellbeing. In *the Seed of a New Society* Le Brun and Murray identified the divisions and tensions created and nurtured under colonialism but still present in the recently independent Seychelles of 1980. These included class, gender, language, skin color, age and education. At the launch of the NYS in February 1981, these stratifications were inevitably carried into the camp with the arrival of 800 young people. In terms of domestic and social arrangements—cooking, cleaning, building maintenance, decision making, problem solving, discipline, healthcare and organizing cultural and sporting activities—it was the task of the NYS to question and transform pre-existing patterns, behaviors, expectations and hierarchies which had long nurtured division, resentment and a host of discriminatory practices. For example, the expectation that there were male domestic tasks and female ones. Living together, away from the family home, offered many opportunities to re-think the conduct of domestic life and relations between boys and girls, of young people with different skin color (and hence often status or privilege) and class backgrounds. In my original essay, I cited the reflections of Gay Lee, who worked in the Health Block, particularly around issues of sex education:

"I saw success in things like the almost complete absence of teenage pregnancies and the positive changes in the relationships between the girls and the boys. I remember seeing a male student who right at the end of his NYS time had to go straight home to look after his mother who had become very ill. He and the rest of the family and neighborhood were really surprised and pleased that he could do the 'female' work of caring, housework and cooking [15]."

I conclude with some caveats and an attempt to place the NYS within a historical perspective and a wider arc of Seychellois cultural life. The above account and my reflections around mental health draw upon a blend of the ideas and practices set out in Le Brun and Murray's *The Seed of a New Society* and how the NYS actually began to function in its very early years. *The Seed* was an immensely ambitious—probably over-ambitious—program and a set of ideas to guide the NYS both philosophically and practically. During the first five or more years of the NYS, *The Seed* shaded how the pedagogies

and domestic or cultural practices developed. It was indeed a broad reference point for many of us who worked there in advisory or pedagogical capacities, but it was also a contested vision both at governmental level and in terms of the daily working practices within the camp. Within the Government, there were factions who wanted the NYS to be more of a military and disciplinary training camp on the one hand, and, on the other, for it to be a meritocratic institution, which would enable a greater number of young Seychellois to gain access to European or African universities. There also remain questions, which I do not attend to here, about the social and psychological consequences of (temporarily) removing this cohort of young Seychellois from their nuclear or extended families. One can only speculate that for some, or perhaps many, this was a liberating experience, but for others a cause for distress and anguish.

Within the quotidian life of the camp fulfilling many of these ambitious goals over a short period of time was a huge challenge for both students and staff, and, indeed, a significant number of the teachers lacked the training—and sympathy—to deliver and support the radical and progressive practices articulated in *The Seed* and initially supported by President René and his Government. In 1998, after 17 years, The NYS was closed, and in its later years, I am led to understand, many of the practices identified above had been dissipated or abandoned.

In this short essay I have attempted to suggest that the guiding principles and actual practices of the NYS in its early years, at their most effective and generative, created a climate and a culture whereby these young Seychellois might grow into—and perform—adulthood with behaviors and dispositions conducive to an enhanced chance of good mental health and wellbeing. Whilst I have no quantitative evidence to ‘prove’ this, my account offers a series of discursive propositions, which identify the kind of conditions espoused by the NYS that would provide the foundation for mental welfare and psychological health. At the heart of my account lies notions of agency and how the NYS as a prefigurative form might encourage and enable the students to become active agents in their own learning and energetic practitioners in their own education and not merely the passive recipients of other people’s theories. Jay Derrick [16] has alerted me to a very recent report from Professor Dominic Wyse and Dr Yana Manyukhina of University College London (UCL), which has reinforced the importance of agency in learning [17]. The conditions of agency generated and presented by the NYS offered the possibility for young Seychellois to grow into more confident, assured, generous and assertive citizens as their lives unfolded into adulthood.

Author’s Note

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