

# Introduction

Every thinking educator has grappled with the basic questions that have dogged the profession from earliest times: What is the best way to teach, or to learn? What subjects should children learn? How responsible are children? How much of a say should they have in what they do? How should schools be run in a democratic society? For most of us these questions must remain theoretical. We inherit an education system and we cannot play out our fantasies in the real world. We must preserve the best in what we have, and not tamper lightly with the existing order.

Occasionally a group of people, uninhibited by tradition, asks these questions ~ and proposes radical new answers, in a "hothouse" setting for all of us to see. Such experiments are especially valuable in providing a completely fresh look at accepted doctrines, and helping us try new ones.

In 1968 a unique experimental school was established in Framingham, Massachusetts. Sudbury Valley School, which is open to students ages 4 to 19, has pioneered a number of highly innovative practices. Its work has gained wide recognition, and it has the distinction of being the first such school ever to

be fully accredited.

One of the most interesting aspects of Sudbury Valley is its attitude toward learning. The school starts from a premise stated by Aristotle over 2000 years ago in his famous opening to the *Metaphysics*: "Human beings are naturally curious." This implies that people learn constantly, as an innate part of living. It means also that children will learn through following their natural inclinations, doing what they want with their time, all day, every day. Regardless of their ages, from the moment students enter the school, they are on their own, forced to take responsibility for themselves and make all the tough decisions that will determine the course of their lives. The school, with its staff, physical plant, equipment and library serves as a resource that is available when asked for, passive when not. The idea is simple: driven by innate curiosity, which is the essence of human nature, children will make enormous exertions to explore and master the world around them.

What actually happens? Everyone learns the basics ~ but at their own pace, in their own time and their own way. Some children learn to read at age five, others at ten. Some learn best from teachers or other students, others learn best by themselves. On any given day, students of all ages can be seen learning together, talking, playing ~ growing. As they grow older, they develop a strong sense of identity and set goals for the future. When they leave they go on to a huge variety of activities ~ professions, trades, businesses, colleges, all over the country. All this takes place in an educational setting where students are the judges of what they should do and how they should progress.

Another of many fascinating innovations is in the organizational structure. The school is governed as a pure democracy, by the School Meeting, in which every student and staff member has one vote. Every aspect of the school operates this way, without exception: rules, budget, administration, hiring

and firing, and discipline. The result is a smoothly run institution in which everyone has a stake, a physical plant virtually free of vandalism and graffiti, and an atmosphere of openness and trust that is unheard of in schools of any size these days. With it all, the school functions without any government or foundation assistance whatsoever, on a tuition that is about half the per pupil expenditure in public schools and far below that of independent private schools.

Perhaps the easiest way to explain the school is to explain what we looked for in an educational institution, and how we set about getting it. Actually, we were after quite a few different things, and we found that all of them fit together into a single, unified whole.

As far as learning and teaching were concerned, we wanted people to be able to learn only what they were eager to learn ~ what they set out to learn on their own initiative, what they insisted on learning, and what they were ready to work hard at. We wanted them to be entirely free to choose their own materials, and books, and teachers. We felt that the only learning that ever counts in life happens when the learners have thrown themselves into a subject on their own, without coaxing, or bribing, or pressure. And we were sure that teachers working with eager, determined, persistent students would experience unusual satisfaction. In fact, we thought that such an environment would be a paradise for students and teachers alike.

In order to be true to ourselves we had to get away from any notion of a curriculum, or a school-inspired program. We had to let all the drive come from the students, with the school committed only to responding to this drive. The full responsibility for each person's activities had to lie with that person, and not with someone else in a position of authority. This is why we have never had any required studies at any level, ever. We fig-

ured that everyone, with the help they could muster at school, could find out for themselves what was and what wasn't necessary to know in order to get where they wanted in life.

This tied in rather closely with the character traits we were hoping to foster. More than anything, we wanted people to experience the full meaning of responsibility. We wanted them to know what it is to be a responsible person ~ not just from books, or lectures, or sermons, but from everyday experience.

The way we saw it, responsibility means that you have to carry the ball for yourself. You, and you alone, must make your decisions, and you must live with them. No one should be thinking for you, and no one should be protecting you from the consequences of your actions. This, we felt, is essential if you want to be independent, self-directed, and the master of your own destiny.

Individual responsibility also implies a basic equality among all people. Whatever authority exists must exist by the free consent of all parties. This is nothing new, of course ~ our country was founded on this principle. To us it was a guide for everyday action.

A lot of concepts are involved in the idea of a responsible individual, and they are all tied up with learning the art of being a free and independent person. The school we had in mind had to be rooted in this idea. We could not be satisfied with anything less than full personal responsibility and accountability for each person, regardless of age, or knowledge, or achievement. We knew that people would make mistakes this way ~ but they would know that the mistakes they made were their own, and so they would be likelier to learn from them. We felt that healthy people would always find ways to benefit from their failures as well as their successes. We believed it a good thing to let people try whatever they want, whether or not they were sure to succeed, so that they would be mentally prepared to meet an unex-

pected challenge, or seize an unexpected opportunity.

The character traits we wanted to foster would be part of a general atmosphere that we hoped would permeate the school. More than anything, we sought an environment that is open, honest, trustworthy, and free of fear. Our goal was to have a school where no one would be afraid, at least not because of anything we did.

Fear of power and authority was what we wanted to abolish from the school. We were not concerned about people having authority. Authority in and of itself can be good or bad, depending on many things. Some situations need persons in authority ~ an apprentice learning situation, for example, or a business.

The main question is how people get their authority, and how it is controlled once they get it. You are not afraid of people in a position of power if you understand why they are there, if you had a hand in putting them there, and if you can keep an eye on everything they do. What you are afraid of is arbitrary authority, authority that excludes you from participation, over which you have no control. We were determined that no person in the school, whether student or staff or parent or guest, should have any cause to fear the authority of anyone associated with the school. This more than anything would make it possible for one person to look another straight in the eye regardless of age or sex or position or knowledge or background.

As far as we were concerned, a democratic form of government is the best way people have ever come up with to manage their affairs. It gives everyone the most leeway possible to be independent, and at the same time, in matters that need joint action, it allows each person to have a full share in making decisions. We felt that the kind of popular democracy practiced in New England town meetings for over three hundred years was a

good form of government, hard to beat. The kind of school we had in mind would be organized entirely on the town meeting model. No one would be left out.

We thought that it made good sense for a school to be run democratically in a country where all forms of government are democratic. From the smallest town to the Federal level, all our institutions have been designed to be democratically controlled in one way or another. We asked ourselves why schools shouldn't be run this way too, and the more we thought about it, the more we thought they should be. In a democratic school, the adult members of the community could apply to the school the same standards of citizenship they applied to their outside lives. And the children in the school could be nurtured in the principles and practices that make up the democratic way of life. By the time they became adults, responsible community citizenship would be natural to them, because they would have lived with it for a long time.

When we took stock of all the different things we were after in the school, we found that they all amounted to a core idea, from which everything else followed naturally.

The idea was of a school where people managed their own affairs without any outside interference, and where they managed their joint affairs ~ the school's business ~ through a kind of town meeting.

It was as simple as that, and it contained the idea of learning we were after; it fostered the character traits we wished to bring out; it embodied the atmosphere we sought; and it had the structure we desired.

Before the school actually started in 1968, many people said that we were dreamers, that our vision of a school was utopian. But now it has existed for years, for everyone to see.

How does it feel to visit Sudbury Valley? The main building is a stone mansion built over one hundred years ago from locally quarried granite. Around it are ten acres of lawns, trees, shrubs, and flowering bushes. At one end of the campus there is a large barn and stable area, converted for school use. At the other end, facing a millpond, is a granite millhouse, next to an earth and stone dam over which extends an old covered wood bridge. Around the campus as far as the eye can see are hundreds of acres of state park and conservation lands, fields and woods, marshes, and rolling hills, which reflect in their changing colors and foliage the different seasons of the year.

The place doesn't look or feel like a school at all. The standard "school cues" are missing. It looks more like a home, with many persons going about their varied activities in a determined, yet relaxed, manner. The furniture, the people, and the ambience are not what one might expect to find. Visitors often feel baffled; they look for what they are used to seeing in schools, and don't encounter it here.

This book is an attempt to help everybody "see" Sudbury Valley. It provides a wealth of personal experience, gleaned from the first twenty years of the school's life. It is not a treatise on educational philosophy or practice, nor is it a formal history of the school. Rather, it is a human story of an experiment absolutely unique in the annals of education.

The Sudbury Valley School Press