

Introduction

The time was 1967. A small group of parents living in the Greater Framingham area had been hunting all over the country for a school that met our requirements. We had travelled far and wide, visited and read about all sorts of places—and had come up empty-handed.

The main thing we all had in common was a deep conviction that the existing educational system would do our children irreparable harm. We felt we *had* to do whatever was necessary to provide the kind of environment we wished our children to have.

So it was that Sudbury Valley School was founded in 1968.

The starting point for all our thinking was the apparently revolutionary idea that a child is a *person*, worthy of full respect as a human being. These are simple words with devastatingly complex consequences, chief of which is that the child's agenda for its own life is as important as anyone else's agenda—parents, family, friends, or even the community. In the school we wanted for our children, their inner needs would have to be given priority in their education at every point.

As a practical matter, this meant that all of our children's activities at school would have to be launched on their own initiative. There could be no externally imposed curriculum, no arbitrary requirements dictating what they should do with themselves. The

school had to be a nurturing environment in which the children themselves choose what they wish to do and schedule their time.

Personal respect also had to be the foundation of our children's process of socialization. This led us directly to the concept of democracy as an institutional imperative. Democracy alone is built on the solid foundation of equal respect for all members of the community, and for their ideas and hopes. And so it became a cornerstone of our philosophy to give everyone at school, without exception, a full and equal voice in running the school.

An interesting feature of this respect, when extended to all members of the school community, had to do with our attitude toward parents. So many educators viewed parents as a nuisance at best, a downright menace at worst. This did not seem right to us, mostly because we were founding a school primarily *as* parents! Any way we looked at it, parents definitely had a place in children's education. From the beginning, we held to this belief, and structured the school accordingly.

This book is a collection of selected essays and short pieces written about the school over the years. They were chosen for their relevance to the current school scene, and for their ability to convey an understanding of what Sudbury Valley School is all about.

The book was put together in response to a need, frequently stated by visitors, prospective enrollees, and educators. We have often been asked for more background material on various aspects of the school. Although the material was available, it was scattered through dozens of publications, most of them issues of our Newsletter, which is published approximately eight times a year. Some minor editorial changes have been made in transcribing these writings from their original sources, in order to make the material more readable and consistent with current school usage.

Perhaps the best way to open the book is with an excerpt from a recent school catalog. Entitled "A Typical Day...A Typical Year", it says:

Even after reading and hearing about the school, and often even after visiting, many people still wonder and ask what a "typical day" is like at school, both for students and for staff. It often comes as a surprise that we have so much trouble responding to such a question.

Our problem is twofold: first, people at school are so different from each other, that no two of them ever do the same thing, at least not for long. Second, there is such total freedom to use time that each person often varies his activities from day to day, or week to week, or month to month.

The variety is truly amazing—until you realize that in the world outside of schools, chances are that any group of people not pre-selected will show just as many differences. At Sudbury Valley, we see just about everything. One person will settle into a perfectly predictable pattern for months on end, always doing the same things in the same sequence at the same times—and then suddenly change to another predictable pattern. Another person will, at totally unpredictable times, be doing something else each time. Another person will go on a series of short term binges—a few intensive weeks (or months) of this, followed by a few intensive weeks (or months) of that.

Some people play all day. Some people talk all day. Some people paint or study or cook all day. Some people do a little of each of these things, according to some schedule they have for themselves. Some come early and leave early, some come late and leave late. One week you are likely to find many people at school by

opening time, and a bustling school soon after. The next week the school may be quiet until mid-morning.

Time assumes a different aspect at Sudbury Valley. Here there are no bells, no periods, no terms, no grades, no "freshman," no "sophomores," no "juniors," no "seniors"; no "preschoolers," no "post-graduates." Time belongs to each student in a very personal sense. Each student learns to understand and work with his own unique internal rhythm, pace, and speed. No one is a fast learner, no one a slow learner. All have in common the quest for a personal identity that is whole, and individual, and that, once found, makes all reference to time seem trivial.

And that is the heart of the matter. By combining absolute respect for self with a deep sense of community, Sudbury Valley has put into practice ideals we have long struggled for. It is the stuff our dreams were made of, brought to life.

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