

# **And NOW for Something Completely Different - The Sudbury Valley School**

(A 45 minute talk to introduce Sudbury Valley School to an audience that has never heard of it. Mike Sadofsky, 23 September, 2014)

First of all, I want to thank the organizers of this event for inviting me. I'm very pleased to be here.

It's interesting to be speaking about "democratic schooling" and "Sudbury Valley School" here in Hong Kong at a time when the topic of democratic governance is so current, but this talk doesn't deal with that. Instead, I want to focus on kids and how we can help them develop into mature and responsible adults. I hope you'll find what I have to say of interest.

Yesterday you heard several speakers talk about a number of alternative approaches to learning and schooling. Today, I want to talk today about something different -- an entirely different concept and practice of schooling - The Sudbury Model, or more specifically, Sudbury Valley School, a place where kids from 4 to 18 have a chance to grow and to learn before they step out into the adult world. I want to tell you a little about what happens there, why it happens, and what happens to the kids that reach adulthood there.

Sudbury Valley School came about in the 1960's. The principal founders were struggling with questions about how they would school their own young children. They began to investigate schools and education models and theories of learning, and, becoming unsatisfied, they went back to "first principles" and asked themselves some questions, like:

What are schools for?

Where did the ideas for schools as we know them come from?

If kids learn to walk and to talk and to play and, for many, to read and to write and ... to perform many other functions and activities without a curriculum, without a teacher, without a school, then what's to stop them from continuing the same process and becoming capable and responsible adults without the structures society has embedded in its school systems?

I won't digress into answers to those questions. There are more than enough books and articles by people with more knowledge and expertise than mine, who have written about the history of schooling and the role of religions and industrialization in creating the school models that prevail all over the world.

After a lot of study and discussion and planning and hard work (by the principal founders, Dan & Hanna Greenberg, and the many others that became interested and helped make the idea a reality, Sudbury Valley

School came to be. The School opened its doors in 1968 and has been operating continuously since then.

Over the intervening years, others have adopted and adapted the model for their local needs. Today one can find Sudbury model schools across the USA, in Europe the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Spain, in Israel, in Japan, and elsewhere. And, if one wants to look for them, there are many others that were inspired by Sudbury Valley School, but for a variety of reasons, adapted the model for their own purposes and constraints. The schools that follow the model have generically come to be called Sudbury schools, although each is an independent enterprise.

There is now a group of people here in Hong Kong who are beginning to express their interest in starting a Sudbury model school. I'll be meeting with them and exploring the model in more depth with them later in the week.

Sudbury Valley School was established in 1968 (a time of social turmoil and ferment in the United States). Our intent was to create a place where kids between the ages of four years and young adulthood could grow and learn and prepare themselves for the next phase of their lives -- when they reach an age of majority, 18 years, a point in their lives when young people are typically ready to enter the workforce or pursue higher education - go on to college or university or learn a specific trade.

This is not different from what any school might say. The difference lies in how we go about it.

Sudbury Valley School **doesn't impose an agenda** on its students. We don't have a curriculum. We don't have any particular expectation that, for example, our students will all learn this, or that, or something else. We don't expect that they will all attend college or university, that all will become "professionals" or "white collar workers" or ....(anything else in particular) We accept the idea, actually we embrace the idea, that each of our students has unique interests and capabilities (and yes, even unique capacities) to achieve.

A casual visitor at SVS will often have two main observations. They say, "Gee, I see a lot of play,"  
and  
"I see a lot of kids talking to one another. I don't see a lot of studying or "learning" going on."

What they mean is that they don't see kids with books and worksheets, with pencil and paper, doing the kinds of "drill" activity that is so often associated with "school." They don't see "classrooms" with kids at desks and a teacher standing before them and leading the kids through a lesson plan.

What they do see are kids of mixed ages in groups of 2, 3, 4, and more, in

all sorts of informal settings and seemingly casual behavior. On the fields, in the sand pit or on the swing set, near the pond or the brook, at the “rocks”, in the barn, in the School’s main building, in room after room... They may be reading books and magazines and stories or news reports on the internet together or individually ...  
or playing music or listening to music or composing music...  
or studying mathematics or chemistry or biology ...  
or painting and creating pottery and designing and sewing clothing and knitting and ....  
or playing ball games ...  
or fishing in the pond...  
or any of the myriad kinds of activities that any of us might be involved with at any time of day or night, at work or at leisure.

Music, art, computers, books, games, crafts, discussion, debate, ....  
Anywhere people might gather to do something together that satisfies their common interest of the moment. (Some have said it looks like “recess” at a more conventional school.)

But what’s really happening under all this “play” and “informality” is a lot of interaction among kids. The “PLAY” is unstructured and can take many directions and explorations. The “CONVERSATION” is far reaching and draws on each kids interests and backgrounds and influences that extend far beyond the School. **Play and conversation.** The talk and debate is constant and intense and effective.

Kids of mixed ages, kids from diverse backgrounds, diverse individual and family beliefs with regard to politics, economics, religion, social relationships, interests and skills, diverse economic conditions, diverse family structures, ... and kids with diverse levels of knowledge and opinion about the matter under discussion. And this all goes into chatter and conversation and debate about the topic. The result is not “schooling” as we typically think of it, but it is “learning” and “maturing.”

You can't see this. I can't see this. The casual observer doesn't see it, but it is taking place. The “staff” see it because they live with it and are frequently a part of it and can recognize the changes in individual kids as they learn and share their knowledge with others. There is no stopping it. It's productive, it's effective, and it's pervasive.

How do I know?

Many years ago, when my kids were enrolled at Sudbury Valley School I did what most parents do with their kids at the dinner table. I'd ask, “What did you do today?” The reply, “Nothing.” Or “I played cards”, “I played basketball,” “I played piano,” or “We had a School Meeting,” Oh, that's interesting, I'd say. “What was it about?” the reply “Nothing.”

Eventually I learned how to get a little more information. We'd talk about something in the news and one of my kids would respond with a new perspective. Where did that come from? “Oh, Thomas said ....” and

another would add, “Well, I learned that’s not true because... “ And all of a sudden it became clear that they were absorbing so much more information than I had ever been exposed to in my years in conventional schooling.

This perception was reinforced over many years of conversations with my kids and their chums when they were students at SVS. And I hear about it now when I talk with older students and listen to what they have to say about their experiences at SVS.

### **What makes a school a “Sudbury School”?**

I want to try to describe for you the characteristics of the Sudbury Valley School and what factors exist in common with schools that call themselves “Sudbury Schools.”

In trying to get down to the core of our approach to the development of each student (or each kid), I don’t think I can use a better word than “**respect.**” Sudbury Schools are based on “respect” for the individual, for his or her autonomy, individuality, rights, independence, uniqueness, personal interests, ....

Everything else stems from this precept. The child is a unique individual, with a set of personal interests, ideas, thoughts, beliefs, .... that may be different than those of others. And we want to respect that individuality, those rights, that autonomy and independence. And what we expect from each and every student is the same **respect** for every member of the school community (student and staff) that we accord to each student.

Let me continue with my discussion of what is common among these “sudbury schools.”

- First and foremost, they are each a **“community” of equals**, the kids participate in making the rules **and** - to the extent they want to (and are deemed capable of) - also in taking on administrative and operational tasks and responsibilities. There is no hierarchy, no “headmaster” or “headmistress.”
- Kids are free to spend their time as they want to. They can study; they can talk and play; they can organize classes and lobby for instruction or for meetings with a knowledgeable person. **There is no curriculum. (No expectation they will master this topic, that subject, at a certain age or at any age.)**
- SVS looks like a large, comfortably furnished home with many rooms that can be used for almost any purpose as the demand changes. **There are no classrooms.** There are, however, spaces that can



adequately house a group that wants to study and learn together. And spaces that can be configured for laboratory purposes. Other Sudbury Schools are configured in a similar way.

- The 6 year olds might spend time with the 10 year olds. A teenager may be working at a table in the arts room next to a 4 year old. A ball game outside will often involve kids of many mixed ages, and a seminar will always consist of a group that spans a decade in age. **There is no segregation of students by age (or any other factor).**
- The “adults” who are hired to be at the school are called “staff” members. Their jobs are multiple. The staff generally assume all of the myriad tasks associated with running an institution that need to be done, and by performing these tasks in an exceedingly professional and expert manner, they serve as adult “models” to the students. They are chosen (as staff members and elected to their designated areas of responsibility) because they exhibit professionalism. They function as “experts” in running the school as a business, in dealing with parents (and with authorities) with the appropriate skills and sensitivities, and in seeing that all the purchasing and contracting that supports the school is done professionally and with expertise. **They are not hired as “teachers.”** They do however, have a depth of knowledge in the typical “academic” disciplines and are available to serve as

resources to students. Other specialists may be engaged from time to time when interests in particular areas rise to warrant the need or utility for them.

- **Sudbury Schools operate as democracies.** Every member of the community may discuss, raise questions (and expect answers) and vote on every matter that needs to be decided to operate the School. Who should be hired for staff? What salary should be paid? What tuition should be charged? What rules should be established to keep the School safe and clean and maintained? The students and the staff, each one as an individual, has the same voice in discussing these issues and in voting to reach a decision.
- What you do find is a **heterogenous collection of young people** exploring the world (both individually and in groups) and doing so physically, intellectually, socially, academically, ... whatever ways you can imagine. And they are taking advantage of a wide variety of resources to do so. They use books and the internet, school staff and fellow students, the occasional visitors as well as more common contractors. They use community resources: colleges, libraries, museums, nature preserves, .... And, as I previously noted, when appropriate, a non-staff professional may be contracted to share their expertise.
- And, oh, yes, there is one more thing. **No tests. No exams. No**

**evaluation” of learning or of knowledge.** Our students follow their own interests; they strive for their own goals; if they want to, they evaluate their own progress or learning or accomplishment. **We do NOT.**

Those are the factors that differentiate Sudbury Valley School from most other schools: No curriculum. No classrooms. No teachers. No tests. Democratic governance. No age segregation.

Some have said, “so you’re a ‘**democratic**’ school. Well, yes, we are, but there is so much variation among the many schools that call themselves ‘democratic’ schools, that I don’t find the term useful. Many, perhaps most of them, offer their students some degree of choice in their day to day activities and studies. And many of them, again perhaps most of them, employ some form of democratic governance or decision making with respect to certain functions. I’d be glad to talk more about some of these differences, but in the time allocated to me, I’d like to focus on what I know best and that’s Sudbury Valley School.

Let me return to the word “**respect**” that I introduced a few minutes ago. Perhaps this word, “**respect**” is the most appropriate way to describe the culture that exists at Sudbury Valley School (and at all Sudbury Schools). To establish a “culture” of ‘respect” and maintain it is a difficult thing to accomplish. I want to talk a little bit about what I mean by this “**culture of**

**respect”** and how it comes to be an essential part of the School.

I know that my next few words are redundant, but I want to make this point.

**Kids (students) at Sudbury schools are co-equal members of the school community.** These students are free to pursue their individual interests, to develop their individual characteristics and their individual personalities as long as their activities do NOT interfere with the abilities of others to do the same. This is what we want them to do and in order to encourage this approach we do **NOT** offer a curriculum. There is **NO** course of study or program of learning that we expect of our students. This is one way in which we build and maintain this “**culture of respect.**” Another way in which kids are shown “**respect**” is that they are assumed able to hold conversations with adults. “Discussion” and “Debate” are never “watered down” so that “kids can get it.” It is discussion and debate among equals, and kids do “get it.” They learn to understand the same level of conversation that you and I might have, and this gives them power. They are “**equals.**” I’ll get back to this again in a few minutes.

In addition to **Play** and **Conversation** and **respect** (for each individual), I want to talk a little bit about 2 structural elements internal to SVS that are also essential to this culture of “respect.”

The first of these is the **School Meeting**. This is where School business matters are dealt with. Finances, Budgets, Expenditures, (all the fiscal matters; Staff hiring (and firing decisions); Election of Clerks (to deal with

administrative matters on a daily basis); Rulemaking; .... Once each week, on Thursday afternoon, a meeting is called to order by the elected chairperson to discuss, debate, and vote on such matters. ALL students and staff members are voting members of this School Meeting. The newly enrolled 4 year old and the most senior member of the elected staff, each possess an individual voice and an individual vote on matters before the Meeting.

The roles of Chairman and Secretary of the School Meeting have, for most of the School's existence, been filled by students, elected to serve that role for one year. The meeting is run somewhat formally in accordance with Robert's Rules of Order. Speakers are recognized by the Chairperson and afforded an opportunity to address the topic of the moment. The Secretary prepares and publishes an agenda prior to the Meeting. It's really an amazing "parliament."

The second of these 2 elements is the **Judicial Committee**. As we all know, among any group of people, there will be disagreements from time to time. We all need ways to resolve them. With a couple of hundred people in the school building every day and most of them young people, conflicts can arise. The **Judicial Committee** (or **JC**) is the mechanism at SVS to resolve conflicts and infractions of school rules. Eight people (seven students and one staff member) meet in a designated room to address allegations of infractions of school rules. The JC functions as sort of a combined investigative body and judge. It determines whether the

infraction occurred, who is responsible, and what resolution is appropriate.

Some “allegations” turn out to be spurious; some may be resolved with an apology; others with banishment from an area or an activity for a day or two. Some issues may seem to be trivial; sometimes, the JC has to deal with a serious infraction. All JC findings are subject to review by the School Meeting. But it is within the JC (and the School Meeting) that the culture of “respect” that I introduced a few minutes ago is made a reality. It’s the JC process and actions that put practical meaning to the School rule that reads: **“No one may knowingly interfere on anyone’s right to be at school free of verbal or physical harassment.”**

There are other rules, of course. Many of them deal with matters like keeping the school and the grounds safe for kids of all ages, and staff as well. Some deal with cleanliness. One says that all activities within the school will be in accordance with laws of the government. We believe in respect for laws and we also exist at the forbearance of the government. So this is a very important issue for us.

**Academics** - I want to talk a little bit about how Sudbury Valley kids learn some of the basic academic skills that are the focus of so much concern in more conventional schools.

I’m going to draw a little bit here from a piece that Dan Greenberg wrote and then from a piece written by one of our former students, now at

University.

In the USA there is a great deal of amazement about an apparent lack of knowledge of money management and simple banking and personal checking and credit card management among high school graduates and young people at the colleges and universities.

This issue is so far removed from our concern (at SVS) that we ALMOST don't believe it can exist. Because, at SVS it doesn't exist. Kids at Sudbury Valley School learn the basics of money management as soon as they enroll, even at age four! How is that? Because the School runs a **bank** within its community.

We needed a system for people to be able to buy and to pay for specialized materials, (items purchased by the school for resale to students who needed that material for their pursuits); wood for woodworking, clay for pottery, photography supplies, chemicals for lab study, ... And even daily snacks from the teenage kids who run a "chartered" snack concession store within the school. And later as special interest groups were established: sports, music, drama, ... they were chartered (by the school) and expected to raise their own specialized funds, often through sales within the school community.

One way to handle this is for everyone to use cash, but a system of "bank checks" is so much easier. So the school created a "bank" and

established what we call “discretionary accounts” for any person who wanted to deposit funds and draw on them at will. They simply write a “check” on their “discretionary” funds. Like every bank, accounts are reconciled every day and The School posts a daily register of the balance in all active accounts.

Everyone learned very quickly how to manage their checking account - how to make certain it had sufficient funds to cover their purchases - and every vendor learned how to find out whether someone’s check had sufficient funds to cover it, before accepting the check as payment. **And every new 4 year old student quickly learns how to use this system.** The basic acts of making deposits, writing checks, collecting funds, and maintaining a positive balance becomes second nature to all the students. When SVS kids transition to the “real world,” there’s no money management learning gap.

Now let me talk a little about how kids learn other things. Jesse (a former student, now at University) wrote, “When I was still a kid at SVS, Hanna, a staff member, would often ask me a question I never really knew how to answer. She’d ask, “Jesse, how did you develop such good language skills? You have such a large vocabulary, where did you learn it?” I never knew how to reply other than, “I dunno, I just picked it up.” Now, as a student of linguistics and cognitive science in college, I have a theory to



answer Hanna's question.

Among the things Jesse studies are "pidgin" languages that only use "directives and descriptives". For example, "There's the field" or "Go work on it." These developed in colonial lands with imported slaves where there was no common language between overseers and laborers. The language is constrained and simplified so much that the underlying syntax isn't apparent.

So, going back to Hanna's question, Jesse, wrote, "if most children grow up in environments where everyone talks to them in simplified, constrained grammar, under the assumption that they aren't smart enough to understand, and only ever gives them directives like "sit down" and descriptives like "this is on the test" then perhaps it would have a similar effect as in the use of pidgin languages. The children aren't being given enough data to properly analyze all the different aspects of their language's syntax. So their command of language stays quite limited."

In answer to Hanna's question, Jesse's theory is that **his language skills came from being in an environment where people weren't afraid to talk to him as an equal, despite his being seven years old and their being 45.** He was exposed to the full breadth of words and syntax, all the different complex constructions you can make, and acquired them naturally at an earlier age as anyone else would if they had access to them. When older students and staff don't constrain and simplify their speech, it gives younger people more data from which to acquire language. Jesse didn't

have to wait until he hit that magic age where people decided he was smart enough to understand relative clauses, or to use “higher-grade” words..

Maybe our kids would pick up language skills faster if we allowed them natural access to the full language, rather than dumbing things down automatically just because of their age.

## **On Graduates**

SVS is authorized by Massachusetts and our local School Board to offer a High School Diploma. In a school that prides itself on **individual responsibility and self-assessment**, this is a bit of an anomaly. But the High School diploma is seen as a rite of passage in the US, and most of our kids (and their parents) want this.

It took us a long time and a number of iterations to devise a process (for award of the diploma) that we are comfortable with and that

seems to work well for us.

We ask the candidate who wants a diploma to argue his/her case before a panel of strangers (three people who understand the model because they are staff members at other Sudbury model schools - but are also people who don't know the candidates (and vice versa)) and convince these people that ***“My experiences during my stay at school have enabled me to develop the problem solving skills, the adaptability, and the abilities needed to function independently in the world that I am about to enter.”*** That's it. Pass the committee and earn a diploma. Prepare for the procedure; write a paper or papers; compile a portfolio or a dvd; or just sit there and answer questions. it's up to the diploma candidate to find a way to present a successful argument or accept the consequence. Most students want a diploma and most succeed at the process; a few don't, usually because they really weren't ready and didn't prepare. Most of the latter eventually find themselves and go on to happy and successful lives.

I want to talk a little bit about our graduates. Our studies indicate that some 80 to 90% of our graduates have enrolled in programs of

higher education. Colleges, Universities, schools of art and schools of trades. Their fields of study are diverse. Their career fields seem to cover the spectrum. How do they earn a living? What do they do? Anything and everything.

You'll find doctors and lawyers, physical scientists and social scientists, writers, engineers and computer scientists, business managers, accountants, inventors, cooks, chefs, farmers, cartoonists, people in the skilled trades -- woodworkers, automotive mechanics, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, builders,..., retailers, unskilled trades (truck drivers, stock clerks, ...), computer programmers and software designers, managers and individual contributors, artists, musicians, dancers, teachers, homemakers, ...people with government jobs, in private industry, entrepreneurs running their own businesses, There doesn't seem to be any pattern or preferences; they are just a diverse group of people.

SVS graduates are sought after by employers and by schools of higher education for a reason. They come across as the responsible people that they are. They've grown up taking responsibility for their actions and inactions. They've learned who they are, what they want,

and how to get it. They are articulate; they have reasoned arguments; they have learned how to organize themselves and groups to get things done. And these characteristics become apparent to strangers when they meet our graduates.

Higher education in the USA typically requires one to take a standard examination. Many of our kids have never taken any tests or exams, never mind one with such consequences. A common question is: “How do they prepare themselves to succeed in such an examination?”

The answer is simple and straightforward. They study. They get a self study exam preparation book and prepare themselves. Now, I suspect, such preparation guides are available on the internet. They take a “prep” exam by themselves and learn their strengths and weaknesses, and then work on their weaknesses. They’ll use textbooks; read literature they had previously ignored; use online resources like **Khan Academy** and **Youtube** and the like. (by the way, lots of our students use such resources whenever they want to learn something. My 11 year old grandson does this too and reports it to be a “great resource.”) Back to our students and graduates -

Then they take the exam and typically do OK or better.

They apply to the schools of interest (to them) and write letters and essays that reflect their unique backgrounds. Sometimes they need to press Admissions Offices for an in-person interview. They get it, and they “WOW” them. And, almost without exception, SVS graduates gain acceptance at their first or second college of choice.

One of our graduates answered an interesting question that was asked of him, this way. The question was, something like this, Shouldn't I worry about sending my kid to a school like this? And the response was, “I'd worry more about sending my kid to a traditional school, where, for 12 years, someone else decides what your kid is exposed to, what they should read, study, learn, ... And then sends them out into the world where they are then expected to make their own decisions. That's something to worry about.”

**And I'll finish with this... A colleague of mine, a widely published author and college professor, was recently quoted**

**this way. He said,**

**“Children who are allowed to make their own choices in an environment where they have real choice and where those choices pertain to real life, learn far more, far more efficiently...”**