

What is Sudbury Valley School?

(A 30 minute talk as an introduction to Sudbury Valley School or Sudbury Schools. Text by Mike Sadofsky: 23 September 2014)

Introduction

First of all, I want to thank the organizers of this event for inviting me. I'm very pleased to be here and to have this opportunity to tell you a little about The 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.

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, after finding a lack of satisfaction, they went back to "first principles" and asked themselves some questions, like:

What are schools for?

Where did they come from?

If kids learn to walk and to talk and to play and, for many, to read and to write and ... without a curriculum and a teacher or a school, 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?

After a lot of study and discussion and planning and hard work, 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 and today one can find Sudbury model schools across the USA, in Europe, Israel, Japan, and elsewhere. These have generically come to be called Sudbury schools, although each is an independent enterprise.

What is SVS?

A few years ago, one of our former students, (he's also a graduate), wrote about the Sudbury model of schooling: what it is, how it works, what's important; what isn't so important. I reread his paper recently and want to draw on it and his ideas in order to present the model to you from a different perspective from the way many people talk and write about the Sudbury Schools.

The usual approach is to talk about democracy, freedom, individual responsibility, respect, self governance,

Let me take a different approach today.

What is it that we want for our children?

- We want our children to live a life full of rich and satisfying experiences. We want them to become independent of us, yet still respect us and be a part of our lives.
- We want them to find a way to earn a living while doing something that satisfies them.
- We want them to have a “lust for life,” to enjoy what they end up doing for a career, to be happy people; people who can laugh and play,...
- We could go on and on, but the point is clear.

We want and expect that our children will find their way in the world; that they will meet their physical and emotional needs; that they will be happy and fulfilled people. When that happens, we’ve done our part.

Kids who go through Sudbury Schools become powerful people with just the attributes and characteristics that I have described.

They learn to think for themselves.

To be intensely analytical in their thinking and planning and decision making.

They learn to deal with multiple viewpoints in subjective situations where there is no clear “truth” or single “best choice.”

While they are learning these things, they also learn to read and to write, and to do basic mathematics.

They learn history and geography and economics, social sciences and natural sciences,

They learn about government and politics and philosophy and “points of view.”

They are exposed to the arts: to music, to painting, to sculpture, to drama, to sports,

And they develop an ability to make clear, logical arguments in matters of deep ethical complexity.

They learn how to find the information they need from many sources - books, the internet, talking to people who are “experts” or practitioners of the art or science, trial and error experimentation, etc. There is never just “one way” to look at an issue and these kids develop that appreciation.

They learn how to set priorities and how to allocate resources.

They learn how to be useful to others and how to be responsible participants in a complex society.

They learn how to create, enforce, and obey the rule of law in an environment with no tolerance for violence, theft, or vandalism.

When they graduate from a Sudbury School, they are adult in ways that most traditionally schooled students can only hope to be.

Just read the graduation essays of past graduates or watch some of the videos that are available on the internet. I think you'll be convinced.

How will they learn all this?

Let's start with "**Free Play.**" What do I mean by this? I mean leaving kids alone with the time and the freedom and the space to explore life. To do whatever comes into their minds with whoever is there and wants to spend time with them.

Let me share an example.

When SVS began, we enrolled our two children. (Our third child came along years later, and also attended Sudbury Valley School.) But let's stay with the older two. They went to school when it opened in the morning at 8 AM and returned home after it closed in the early evening at 5 PM. I saw them briefly in the morning before I went off to my job. We tried to eat dinner as a family and I'd ask about their day. What did you do today? "Nothing!" "Played." "Read." "Talked." Those are the kinds of answers I'd get.

So I arranged to take a day off from my work and visit the school. I found my son (about 8 years old then) sitting at a large round table with a group of boys ranging in age from perhaps 6 years to 12 years old. They had a

mass of modelling clay shared among them and were playing a game of their own construct; a game they had designed.

I watched for a while, fascinated, as I heard them discussing how the clay was apportioned among them. Watched them measure out allotments. Heard them discuss who would be authorized to construct models of this or that machine from the clay. And if this machine was to be made, don't we also need that machine? (One of the older kids was a "budding" mechanic, who later became an inventor,) How precise the models needed to be. What values they would assign to each piece of modelled apparatus. How the apparatus could be traded among the players and how the apparatus could be used in the game.

So what were they doing?

In addition to the essential game, whatever that was, they were engaged in Product Design, Specification, Manufacturing, Commerce, Negotiation, Trade, and, yes, (they were boys) even Battle and War.

It was "Free Play" and it was learning. And learning so many things. They would each put into their negotiation what they knew, what they felt, what they'd read or heard from parents, friends, TV (this was before the internet era) and they'd create plans and agree on an approach to whatever issue was in front of them at the time - or whatever related issue they could

imagine arising as their game progressed. After watching this for a couple of hours, I left and never worried about what and how they were learning.

This sort of thing is going on all the Time in Sudbury Schools. The groups may be smaller; they may be larger. They might be informal games such as what I watched; they might be larger and engaged in a musical production and performance with as many as 40 or 50 kids. Or anything else.

I want to talk about some of the other mechanisms that support their learning and development in this environment. These mechanisms include: ***freedom, personal responsibility, administering school rules and managing school business, and finally, talking, thinking, and reflecting.***

Rigorous freedom.

At a Sudbury School, your child can do whatever he or she wants to do, for as long as they want to do it and no staff member is going to suggest that it isn't appropriate or that they might want to try something else for a while. It's OK to spend all day playing a game or painting or reading or fishing (in the pond) or playing ball or playing music or playing a computer game, or anything else that the child may choose to do that day. They might eat lunch at 10:00 AM, or at 4:00 PM or maybe they are too busy all day to eat lunch and their lunch is still untouched when it's time to go home. (That

was often the case with my kids, and they'd eat their lunch in the car while riding home at the end of the day.)

The only restriction on their activity is that they can't infringe on any else's rights to be free of verbal or physical harassment, or to disrupt someone's activities, etc. They must behave in concert with the rules of the school that they have the opportunity to participate in making, and they must behave in accordance with the laws of the State, which the School takes care to respect.

Personal responsibility.

At a Sudbury School each individual, student or staff, age 4 years or 40 years (or older) is responsible for their individual actions (and inactions); their participation or lack of participation (in activities); their personal behavior; their respect for school rules and for others.

No one is "looking over their shoulder" to tell them what to do, or to NOT do. But if a rule is broken, someone is likely to notice and cite the offense. If the School's expectations of a staff member aren't met, this will also be noticed and discussed by the community.

Kids (and adults) all learn from such events; from the ensuing discussions; and from the resultant consequences. There are always "*consequences*" to a rule infraction. If it is deemed something "small and relatively minor"

the consequence may be an admonishment (coupled with an agreement) to not do something again, or a restriction from some activity or some area of the school or the grounds for a day or two. Perhaps an “offender” may be tasked to an end-of-day trash collection chore for 3 days. If a more significant event, it will be dealt with more harshly; suspension (from school attendance for a number of days); indefinite suspension requiring an in-person conference with the student and parents in attendance and then a plea before the School Meeting for return to the school community. Staff members are subject to the same consideration. In every instance of “rule infraction” the issue is aired before the Judicial Committee or the School Meeting. (And I’m going to describe and talk about each of these next.)

Participation in the School’s legal system.

This is one of the few rare mandatory activities at Sudbury Valley School (and, I think, at all Sudbury Schools.) A “committee” meets regularly to deal with allegations (of rule infractions). The group is comprised of 5 students from 5 representative age groups (even the youngest participate) and selected for 1 or 2 week terms of office (so everyone participates and the demands on each one’s time is limited), 2 elected Judicial Clerks (who run the meeting), and one staff member. A couple of recent essays (available on the School’s website,) describe it as “the heart of the school.”

In writing about the first time a new student comes in contact with the Judicial Committee (as a member, as a witness, as a complainant, or as someone alleged to have broken a rule, one of the essayists wrote: **this is where their own real power becomes evident.** They've been told about their rights and responsibilities, but when they see it played out here in the context of an investigation, it really takes hold.

“ No one assumes your guilt if you have a complaint against you. People ask questions and listen calmly for however long it takes to unravel a story. Sometimes really simple sounding complaints, upon investigation, yield a long and intricately tangled story. Sometimes the truth comes out as, “Oh, yeah, I remember now,” from someone who didn't remember until the scene was thoroughly painted and all the participants gathered. Words like, “I guess I did; yes it was my fault,” trip lightly, suddenly, from the tongue of a child who walked in - fearful of retribution and not being heard fairly. A child who never meant to tell the truth, being so used to the big cover ups she mounted at her other school.

Everyone sees that no votes are taken until the story is out. Everyone sees that people can only be charged with having broken an actual rule, not something someone might wish was a rule. Everyone. Everyone, after one or a few contacts with the JC, knows the score: what they say counts. They are listened to as carefully as staff, as teens, as four year olds. Oh, and they see that staff are subject to the same rules. This is empowerment.”

Participation in the School's administrative system.

The school as a legal entity is a Massachusetts Corporation, The Sudbury Valley School, Inc. Because it is a non-profit corporation, there are no shareholders. Instead, the Corporation consists of the School Meeting which is made up of **students and staff**. The school is governed by the School Meeting, which manages the school's affairs. It meets every Thursday at 1:00 PM. The meetings are run formally according to strict rules of order. The agenda is always published in advance and is called the School Meeting Record.

The School Meeting has full authority to run the school and it does it all: it makes policy, prepares the budget, appropriates funds, hires the staff, passes all the school rules (the permanent rules are codified in the School Meeting Lawbook), oversees discipline, and sets up administrative entities to keep things running smoothly. It is presided over by the School Meeting Chairman who is also the President of the school Corporation. The School Meeting also elects a Secretary to keep records.

To keep all the myriad activities of the school running smoothly, the School Meeting creates Clerks, Committees, and School Corporations.

Clerks are basically administrative officers. For example, there is an Attendance Clerk who supervises attendance records, after-hours use of the building, etc.; there is an Office Clerk who takes care of the office; and

so on. When the School Meeting creates a Clerkship, it spells out the officer's exact powers and duties and confers its authority on the Clerk within the domain it has defined.

Committees take care of broader tasks. For example, the Physical Plant Committee takes care of all matters relating to the school's maintenance, to its appearance, and its furnishings. Anyone (student/staff) can join these Committees and share in the discussions, planning, and execution of the duties.

School Corporations are formal interest groups. They are Sudbury Valley's equivalent of Departments at other schools. They are formed and disbanded according to the needs and interests of the students. For example, there is a Cooking Corporation which takes care of all kitchen activities; a Sports Corporation; and so forth. Corporations are chartered for a specific set of purposes by the School Meeting and given certain powers. Funds are channeled through the Corporations to support various educational activities.

The “learning” that occurs through participation in this process (of running the school) transcends any designated “discipline” (mathematics, writing, reading, debate, law, history, social science, logic, art, ...). Elements of all of these and others come into debate and discussion, and our students become interested and knowledgeable, and participate in the debate and in learning more.

I want to stress that it is NOT the existence of these two bodies (The School Meeting and the Judicial Committee) or the threat of their actions that makes the difference at SVS; rather it is the participation of each of the students and staff members with a voice that can be heard and a vote that counts when decisions are made. This “empowerment” of young people in an environment where they spend so much of their young lives, makes them powerful people with the attributes that take them forward into adulthood as responsible and capable members of society at large.

Constant interaction (Conversation and debate and discussion)

Communication is the way we learn to share ideas with others; to explore one another's perception of what may be going on around them, of their individual views and perceptions of important events and (perhaps) unimportant events and activities and exposures. We all interact. And kids do it, in fact, they are driven to do it from the earliest age.

Young children learn to speak first with (meaningless) sounds and then sounds that approach words, and then with sentences (often incomplete at first), but we get meaning from them and we answer them.

Then they become teenagers and they don't talk to us, they talk to each other, all the time, about "nothing" we think. Clothes, music, movies, ... But they are sharing ideas, perceptions, worldviews. ...

Kids at Sudbury Schools are free to spend as much time as they want doing just this: talking, sharing ideas, exploring each others minds and perceptions and worldviews.

And so, in a nutshell, these are the elements that make Sudbury Valley School an effective environment for kids to develop into the kinds of people we hope them to be. Through free play, intellectual freedom, taking personal responsibility, participating in community governance and rule enforcement, and talking. **And most of all, from deep inside themselves, from that place where all true learning always originates.**