

The Sudbury School and Influences of Psychoanalytic Theory on Student-Controlled Education

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Abstract

We have come to expect high degrees of authority from administrators, teachers, parents, school boards, even government, yet only a few schools have embraced the notion of total and absolute freedom of choice for the students themselves. The history of educational reforms suggests that there are three factors within the course of traditional forms of education that have served to create a model for a school on the fringe of society which has quietly endured for nearly a century. Founded upon the same principles as A.S. Neill's Summerhill School of England, over 80 Sudbury Schools worldwide operate upon three fundamental precepts: the belief that traditional education ignores a child's ability to make educational choices, the belief that traditional education is punitive to a child, and the belief that traditional education is psychologically damaging to a child. What is most distinctive about the Sudbury model is that it may be the last educational bastion in the world based almost exclusively on Freudian tenets.

The issue of who makes decisions about what goes on in the classroom is one that has been debated throughout history, at times even more contentiously than discussions of curriculum or pedagogy. The dialogue frequently centers around the struggle for whose hand will win control over important decisions such as what a student should learn, when she should learn it, how she should learn it, and who should teach it to her. The tone of the discussion often puts something of a chill on the notion that the student herself could take a muscular role in her own education. Instead, it presents itself as a value conflict rising out of enigmatical beliefs about the abilities of children to dictate their own education.

In light of this irresolute history concerning who ought to have the upper hand in schools, a lack of universal consensus is unsurprising. Private schools and charter schools are inherently founded upon core beliefs that are somehow separate from what is being taught in traditional schools. This private arena is where most educational reforms are implemented. The goals of many private educational reforms are not so much in opposition to traditional education, but differ in their beliefs about which aspects represent greatest importance. What is the primary goal of school? Is it intellectual development? Democratic governance? Healthy emotional and social growth? To learn discipline and self-control? Self-fulfillment? To create valued citizens? Deciding which

goal trumps another, which one is more deserving of energy and money, is a value judgment of each founding philosopher.

So what should we make of the idea that children should dictate the course of their own education? We have come to expect high degrees of authority from administrators, teachers, parents, school boards, even government, yet only a few schools have embraced the notion of total and absolute freedom of choice for the students themselves. The view that a child has the mental and emotional capacities to make these kinds of decisions is a difficult one to market.

Battles for control of classrooms have often played out like Who's-on-first comedy routines. It is useful, therefore, to broaden these discussions of power to analyze an educational model that takes a warmer view of the abilities of students to decide for themselves not only what to learn, but *when or if* they will learn it, *how* they will learn it, *where* they want to learn it, *why* they will or won't learn it, and *who* they will choose to teach it to them. My comments will focus on the influence of psychological ideas about what is best for students, and how beliefs about the emotional growth of children tie into the ways in which they learn. While many progressive ideas were child-centered and allowed for student control over education, few educators actually established schools in which the students had *complete* control over their behaviors and choices.

On the surface this sounds like a tough package to sell, yet the history of educational reforms suggests that there are three factors within the course of traditional forms of education that have served to create a model for a school on the fringe of society which has quietly endured for nearly a century. Founded upon the same principles as A.S. Neill's Summerhill School of England, the Sudbury Schools operate upon three fundamental precepts: the belief that traditional education ignores a child's ability to make educational choices, the belief that traditional education is punitive to a child, and the belief that traditional education is psychologically damaging to a child. All three of these beliefs are born from answering the question of who's in charge of the child, in favor of the child himself.

Neill packaged Freud's ideas about the benefits of psychoanalysis into a functioning school, one treating the emotional and psychological health of students as paramount over any other consideration. Reams of research are available on the powerful effects of self-directed learning by older students, and the delicacy of emotional growth in the young ones. But Neill's Summerhill, and the Greenberg's Sudbury, deny the existence of a childhood *or* an adolescence as defined by the field of educational psychology, and treat all students with an even temper. Aged four or aged eighteen, each student is held fully responsible for their own education within the school, making use of the facilities and the materials as they please. In this educational utopia, the instant gratification of needs is seen, as Freud believed, to be essential to freedom from adult neuroses.

What is the relevance of psychoanalytic ideas for the study of education? For every person who mocks Freud, another one finds him a brilliant theorist. Enough

parents have enrolled their children in Summerhill and Sudbury to make one wonder what aspects of psychological thought are most attractive in theories of education, and which of these might be realistically applied in traditional schools. Although I am doubtful of the validity and efficacy of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic treatment or a general philosophy on life, it will be useful to explore which ideas in this school of thought may demonstrate merit in traditional classrooms.

Roots of Summerhill and Sudbury

Most efforts to hand over the reins of educational control from adults to children are likely to cause us to respond skeptically if not with extreme resistance. Any departure from the standard grammar of schooling will get our attention (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p.84). Yet many progressives suggested the educational system allow the student a greater depth of freedom to choose. Maria Montessori believed so strongly in a young child's ability to choose that she established highly successful preschools around her project method. Margaret Naumberg founded the Children's School (later the Walden School), whose goal was individual transformation of each student by incorporating both intellectual and emotional intelligence in the school. Marietta Johnson established The Organic School in an attempt to mimic the natural learning styles of children. Bertrand Russell operated the only other school in England besides Summerhill that was demonstrating complete freedom of choice in work and behavior, although he did not weave psychotherapeutic ideas into the fabric of his educational theory as Neill did, finding it "too fantastic" to accept.

Many of these schools represented a resurgence of the educational ideas of Rousseau and Thoreau. Thoreau's emphasis upon lived experience as an essential element of education was central to his beliefs about learning. Rousseau's fantastical Emile was not merely a critique of traditional education, but also an argument about when he believed children were able to reason. Dewey advocated a compromise between purposeful activity and play. The majority of progressive ideas about educating students involved looking at schools through a holistic lens. Tyack perhaps describes the progressive vision of education best: "A child growing up in the era of one-room schoolhouses, where acquiring vocational skills were not only expected but paramount to making an honest living, could see work-family-religion-recreation-school as an organically related system of human relationships" (Tyack, 1974, p.15).

In retrospect, most of our ideas about what education in the United States ought to look like have been a reaction to the alleged narrowness and formalism of traditional education. Educational movements like Sudbury that grant a child greater control have deep roots in progressive education. Indeed, a main objective of progressivism was to educate the whole child, to attend to not just intellectual growth but communally to emotional and physical growth as well, what Kirschner referred to as an "organism of interaction" (Kirschner, 1991, p.139).

Having a school that cares for the whole child rather than just the intellect is probably attractive to any caring teacher and is a fine idea, but does the intellect need to be divested from the umbrella of “caring”? In terms of where this idea of education as “caring” started, it is difficult to say which is the chicken and which is the egg. Did the progressive movement promote the view of education in which the self is paramount, or was the movement an outgrowth of a tendency that already existed? Probably both, but the point is that the progressive movement gave ideology and energy to what later became the free school movement of the 1960’s. The idea of authority being taken away from the teacher and given to the student; the notion that no one should fail a test; preserving the emotional and psychological integrity of children; an emphasis on personal creativity – these are all hallmarks of the Sudbury School as well as the progressive movement of the 1930s and 1940s.

But if the characteristics of the progressive movement presaged those of the free school movement, so did its problems. Psychoanalyst Erich Fromm pointed out that replacing an external moral authority with the internal authority of one’s own feelings is confusing to a student. In other words, “Don’t do that because it’s wrong”, as opposed to “I don’t want to do that because I might feel bad”. According to Fromm, a student may be so confused by the lack of authority as to be even more oppressed than he was before. If the student is no longer aware of external adult control, she cannot fight back and thus develop a sense of independence (Fromm, 1961). The lack of adult authority considered so essential to the Sudbury model may, if Fromm is right, be even more damaging to the child than the more familiar constraints of the traditional school.

In what ways then should choices about behavior be free, original, and creative? Not all behaviors are useful. To be merely “free” is not necessarily worthwhile. Where are we to find the values which dictate the extent to which education is to encourage freedom? As a general principle, centering education around a child’s needs is a worthwhile idea, but under the aegis of child-centered pedagogy the Summerhill and Sudbury models this has been taken to its most absurd limits. While the desire to shield students from the possible psychological damage of the imposition by adults on rules and restrictions of educational and behavioral choices may be an accurate description of part of the problem, they have the diagnosis wrong in subtle ways. It is dangerous to suggest to a student that it is beneath his dignity to learn from others. It is equally dangerous to forego teaching important facts in order to give the student a chance to discover them for himself.

What, then, is the relation between education and the pursuit of happiness? Adler makes a distinction between two conceptions of happiness – one psychological and nonmoral, the other ethical. He concludes that the role of education in the attainment of happiness is limited but vital. That there are right and wrong desires isn’t a new idea, but it sounds too authoritarian in education. But Adler says that “authority is reason and nothing else”, so it follows that the concepts of happiness freedom require education to secure them (Adler, 1970, p.113).

Influence of Psychology on Educational Models

In efforts to create emotionally positive experiences for students based on their natural leanings, psychology's influence on education has been pervasive. Topics like "learning" and "development", which can be explored within psychology, are not so obviously distinguishable from an educational point of view. Much educational research is guided by psychological theories and not purely educational ones. How can one tell the difference? If a primary goal of psychology is to explore the nature of learning and development, should education even make attempts at divesting themselves from similar studies? And if the two fields are compatible, then what aspects are most relevant for application within a classroom?

In education, the core issue of control becomes tied with making learning meaningful within the scope of children's daily lives. Learning should be natural, so saith Rousseau and a bevy of his believers, including Spencer, Dewey and Thoreau. Immense amounts of time, energy, and money have been spent trying to make learning in the classroom match children's spontaneity outside of it. In Egan's interpretation, the "holy grail of progressivism" has been to discover methods of instruction derived from and modeled on children's effortless learning (Egan, 2002, p.38). Both psychology and education have dipped their respective fingers in this pie. But if psychology is not a science like physics or biology, neither is education. Both are value-saturated in ways that pure sciences are not. How can we talk about a "science of learning"?

Progressive ideas about education during the first half of last century were often couched in terms of science. B.F. Skinner was well-known for his attempts to turn the study of behavior into a pure science, and was successful at introducing us to the concept of operant conditioning. What is less well-known is that Skinner also made serious attempts to apply these principles to transform the educational system. He labeled education "the most important branch of scientific technology" (Adler, 1977, p.19) and wholeheartedly believed that all individuals learned by doing. He also envisioned classrooms without teachers, but his teachers would be replaced not with human "facilitators", but with machines, describing teachers as "a mere reinforcing mechanism" (1977, p.22). Despite this, he was not unreasonable when he opined that anything which encourages individuality is "probably a move in the right direction" (1977, p.172). By the 1940's Skinner was arguably the most celebrated psychologist since Freud.

One of the early pioneers and one of the most influential researchers in educational psychology was Jean Piaget, who was active during the period when progressive education was gaining popularity. According to Piaget, each child passes through distinct stages of development at highly individualized rates, so it is virtually impossible to predict when a child will enter one stage or complete another. The details of these stages need not concern us here, but Piaget did admit that rushing a child's development could be damaging. Seen in this light, letting students develop and learn at their own pace seems preferable to possibly hurting their cognitive and emotional growth. But Piaget was not attempting to apply his theories to classrooms; he merely described what developmental changes will occur in normal social environments.

Erik Erikson, like Piaget, developed a theory of developmental stages focusing less on cognitive development and more on the psychosocial. Erikson believed that between the ages of six and twelve it was essential for students to experience classroom success to preserve a positive self-image. The implications of this theory in schools are significant. Are educators expected to interpret this to mean that *every* experience in the classroom must lead to success, or simply that teachers provide random opportunities for guaranteed success? Logically, the only way to protect fragile egos, and of course to ensure success, would be for adults never to ask students to learn anything which might have the slightest possibility of failure for them. According to Kohn, this creates a false and very dangerous distinction between achievement and self-esteem. Is a healthy ego only promoted by a noncompetitive environment in which there are no expectations for a student?

In 1960 when the Sudbury model was inchoate, psychological theories were extremely popular. Carl Rogers' ideas about self-actualization being the goal of education meant a total reorientation of the school from developing the intellect to developing one's emotional personality. Like Neill, he made no bones about his belief that education should be therapy, with the goal of emotional freedom. Rationality being the enemy of emotionality, Rogers felt that allowing a student to rely organically on her emotions was most harmonious. Consequently, focusing on the rational would be damaging for a child. Other theorists echoed the importance of emotional freedom in schools. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs became a mantra for the decade. These humanistic ideas about education implied that the whole person was engaged in growth and development – the emotions, the mind, personality - not just the intellect.

The problem with interpreting theories about emotional and psychological development comes when “experts” attempt to apply theories to those of learning and pedagogy. The Sudbury model begs the question as to whether the lowest level of performance from a student is accepted as the optimum he can achieve. If students are not encouraged to try the really difficult math equation or make sense of a complicated piece of literature, how is one to know whether or not they can do it? Depriving a student of overcoming an intellectual hurdle and discovering a true ability seems just as damaging as gambling upon whether they might stumble upon it without the benefit of guidance.

Psychoanalysis in the Schools: Sometimes a Pen is Just a Pen

During the 1920's when Summerhill was established in England, the two major streams of thought in child-centered pedagogy were expressionism and Freudianism (Cremin, 1964, p.208). The latter became the basis for Summerhill, and subsequently Sudbury. Lawrence Cremin discussed the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis on schools in his book *The Transformation of the School*. The focus on the ideas of Freud represented a shift away from intellectual concerns, and became itself an “effort of re-education...(by) sublimating the child's repressed emotions into socially useful channels”

(1964, p.209). Terms such as *sublimation* and *repression* were highly significant to those in the Freudian know.

Applying the concepts of repressed urges and transferred emotions to classrooms, the teacher becomes a parental substitute in which earlier traumas are revisited. Not only do teachers need to coddle the unconscious impulses of their students, they must be highly aware of their own unresolved subconscious issues. Seen in this light, it becomes imperative that teachers understand and effectively use these psychoanalytic buzzwords – transference, identification, sublimation – so that what is defined as “discipline” in the classroom can transform into freedom from neurosis and pave the way toward healthy development.

From its inception, child psychoanalysts could not help but talk about neuroses created by traditional education: school phobias, stuttering, running away, not being able to learn to read, truancy, or participating in pranks were all fair game as examples of how psychologically traumatized the nation’s children had become. By the early 1930s psychoanalysis was influencing the ways in which schools were designed, particularly through the efforts of Anna Freud, August Aichhorn, Siegfried Bernfeld, and Melanie Klein. Sigmund Freud, ironically, was ambivalent about the whole concept of learning and didn’t appear to take a real stand on education *or* the psychoanalysis of children.

The implications of this notion were clear to Neill: the voice of the home was more powerful than the voice of the school (Neill, 1960, p.360). For Neill there were two obvious alternatives – either dramatically alter every home environment, or find a way to make schooling compatible with the goals of Freud’s psychoanalytic technique. Since Freud postulated that one’s emotions were more important than one’s intellect, and traditional schools were based on intellect alone, Neill felt absolutely compelled to establish a school where he believed emotions should come first.

Neill wanted not only to avoid, but actively destroy, all forms of moral sanctions. He believed that the source of all childhood trauma was moral training by adults. He felt teachers should join in children’s games and use the language they used. Children must not be taught the difference between right and wrong since Neill did not believe that adults knew the difference themselves. The philosophy was that if children are given love and *complete* approval to do as they please – provided it’s not dangerous – they will grow up happy and more mature. Making the school fit the child would ensure that those with innate ability will become scholars (Neill, 1960, p.4).

Neill made no secret of wanting to help children escape “diseased attitudes to sexuality and bodily functions” and wanted these issues overtly addressed. He cites children in his school who were able to take an interest in learning only when he arranged opportunities for them to exhaust a preoccupation with bathroom subjects (Hemmings, 1973, p.84). Neill clearly believed that repression of sexuality was one of the most damaging practices of modern education, a process Freud called “sublimation”. The much-parodied Freudian slip is thought to be an expression of the unconsciously repressed sexual libido.

It may sound strange to talk about psychological vulnerabilities and sexual compulsions in the same breath as ideas about schooling, but the belief in the magnitude of transference upon a child served as the framework for both Summerhill and Sudbury. Neill pulled no punches about defining it: "Hate breeds hate, and love breeds love." Love was expressed through fun and games, viewing the world through a child's mind. Hate was transmitted to a child by teaching duty, obedience, profit, consideration for others, and faith in men (Neill, 1960, p.8). The idea of transference, a central idea posited by Freud and the discussion of which is a central focus of psychoanalytic technique, is that children are vulnerable to us more than adult relationships. Adults have an especially charged responsibility to reflect on the impact of their transferences. In other words, adults in positions of authority pass down to children not only their own desires and anxieties, but those of previous generations as well.

These sentiments were pulled directly from the psychoanalytic view of the defining relationship in the classroom: that between teacher and student. Freud stated that emotional ties between student and teacher were "a perpetual undercurrent in all of us" and that the path to knowledge can be facilitated or blocked by the teacher (Freud, 1914, p.214). When Neill suggested that adults at Summerhill run around outside with the students, he wasn't just forming an idea from whole cloth. In 1913 Freud published his belief that "only someone who can feel his way into the minds of children can be capable of educating them" (Freud, 1913, p.189).

What is so touching and terrible about Neill's views on education is the fact that he truly believed that psychoanalysis would change life for the better for everyone; there would be no more unhappiness or crime in the world. He saw the absurdity of asking each and every individual to spend time and money lying on a couch. The only solution he allowed himself to reach was to let children be absolutely free so that they wouldn't need any therapy. Accordingly, the dominant influence on Neill came though Freud, and his votary Wilhelm Reich. Admittedly, Neill never read Dewey, or any other educator associated with child-centered progressivism (Neill, 1960, p.13). While this admission undoubtedly makes many educators shake their heads in disbelief, secure in the knowledge that someone of the caliber of Dewey would avoid unbalanced and unsupported arguments, the fact remains that Neill's writing inspired thousands in the 1960's while Dewey's did not.

The Uniqueness of the Sudbury Vision

What is most distinctive about the Sudbury (and Summerhill) model is that it may be the last educational bastion in the world based almost exclusively on Freudian tenets. From the perspective of the goal of constant student happiness, it is difficult to visualize how such a system would serve its primary purpose of education. Yet there are over forty Sudbury schools in the United States, and nearly as many overseas.

Certainly there is extensive precedent for the notion of allowing students greater control and freedom of their choices within schools. Libertarian sentiment swelled once again in the hearts 1960's America, a rebirth of turn-of-the-century progressivism. The Free School Movement of this decade illustrated the deep undercurrent of distrust that people had about society solving its social problems, and the efficacy of the educational system in this effort. Kirschner described this period of skepticism as a counterculture challenge to the traditional, hierarchical mode of the conservative progressives. John Holt and Peter Marin were active in urging parents to move away from experts and empower themselves to get involved in running the schools. Ivan Ilich's *Deschooling Society* took many educational circles by storm. Goodman certainly believed that "abstract power", in the form of discipline and bureaucracy, thwarted normal functioning and debased students.

In the old paradigm, teachers were viewed as mere transmitters of someone else's knowledge, whereas this new paradigm viewed children as accomplished learners upon arrival, with the teacher intruding only minimally into the process of discovery. In 1960 Neill pronounced schools that "made active children sit at desks studying mostly useless subjects is a bad school (only) for (those) who want docile, uncreative children who will fit into a civilization whose standard of success is money" (Neill, 1960, p.4). But in this new wave of freedom from constraint and orderly learning, Lawrence Cremin found little of redeeming quality. He countered Neill's sentiments by calling this new progressivism a fad, a "license to pass for liberty, planlessness for spontaneity, recalcitrance for individuality, obfuscation for art, and chaos for education" (Cremin, 1964, p.207).

One young couple was especially taken with these explicitly counterculture ideas, the suggestions by Holt and others to educate children according to a set of attitudes, beliefs, and values that were directly opposed to those of mainstream society. Daniel and Hanna Greenberg's vision was utopian: to build a new society on freedom, with education serving not the interests of the state but entirely devoted to the happiness of the individual. While the core of the Free School Movement was strongly libertarian, and many turned to homeschooling as a viable alternative, the Greenbergs were part of a sensitive minority that became profoundly alienated from the predominant culture. Ph.D.-educated physicists, The Greenbergs rode the wave of sentiment during the 60's that looked toward schools as increasingly irrelevant. They founded the Sudbury School in 1961, in Framingham, Massachusetts, based on the philosophies of A.S. Neill's Summerhill School in England.

Summerhill had been quietly operating in England since 1921, forty years prior to the establishment of Sudbury. But when Neill's book *Summerhill* was published in the United States in 1961, it was serendipitously supplemented by a lavish article in *Look* magazine, and provoked an extraordinary Summerhill vogue. One reviewer called Neill's book "the bible of the extreme romantics in the Free School movement" (Miller, 2002, p.55). An American Summerhill Society was formed with the intention of opening an American Summerhill School. This did not materialize, but a large number of private schools were started which advertised themselves as Summerhillian, including Sudbury. Daniel and Hanna Greenberg's vision paralleled that of A.S. Neill in important ways.

The criterion of success in this model is the process, not the product. The Sudbury School allows students complete freedom of choice – in behavior as well as education. In order to best avoid the traditional difficulties associated with teacher-student relations in the classroom, there are no teachers in Sudbury schools, only “staff”. And there are no classrooms, as such, just rooms in which students may choose to congregate. The school is non-compulsory, so there are no required activities. Playing outdoors is encouraged, and there is a strong emphasis on the artistic creativity in all its forms. Learning to read is not even on the radar, and principles of mathematics are particularly discouraged.

At Sudbury, students are free to express themselves with words of their choosing, no matter how offensive they may be to outsiders. Students decide if they want to learn something, and are free to terminate a lesson at will. There are no external rewards or punishments for educational decisions. Students at Sudbury are free to choose how they spend their time each day. The school’s educational philosophy contends that by giving children trust and responsibility at an early age, it will be easier for them to learn what they want, in ways they choose to learn it. Sudbury staff members contend on the school’s website that students must learn “how to not always do their best”. What is important is that the student is motivated internally since then the learning will be meaningful. If a student is asked to do her best all the time, it creates pressures believed to be too overwhelming, and asks for a balance she is unable to achieve.

Shades of Anti-Intellectualism

When a school unapologetically admits that its students are not held accountable for their achievements in any manner, to be criticized as anti-intellectual should not come as a surprise. Bestor opined that “the disciplined mind is what education at every level should strive to produce” (Bestor, 1985, p.59). If a goal of education is to maximize intellectual growth, then it stands to reason that an untempered mind would represent anti-intellectual pursuits. Yet even Hofstadter in his Pulitzer-prize winning *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* admits that the term does not yield very readily to definition. He interprets the attitude as one of “suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it” (1963, p.7). But he also allows that “pure and unalloyed dislike of intellect is uncommon” (1963, p.7). Does the Sudbury model demonstrate a pure rejection of the intellect? Despite their tenet that no student should be taught anything unless he requests it, this alone does not fall entirely within the parameters of the above definition.

Yet even E.D. Hirsch, perhaps most well-known for criticisms of the apparent rise of anti-intellectualism in schools, concedes that “it is psychologically very healthy to be against school if school is painful.” (Hirsch, 1990, p.176). He does not find fault with a focus on healthy emotional development, but points a finger at curricular changes, stating that “fragmentation of the school curriculum (is) the main cause of decline in literacy in the country” (1990, p.165). Sudbury schools do not use textbooks, but Hirsch is fine with

that, as he believes there are no good textbooks. The ideas of Hirsch and those of the Greenbergs represent a paradox of anti-intellectualism. If being against painful education and textbooks are equally anti-intellectual, what is the true definition of the term?

Searching For What Works

As mentioned above, the tenets of Summerhill and Sudbury stem from ideas central to early progressivism, ideas about learning being organic and somehow natural. The mind of a child must have some preferred natural kind of learning that should be discovered and isolated in order to improve education. Therein lies yet another paradox: that children have to be educated is a circumstance which only proceeds from the fact that they are not led completely by nature. In other words, we are not led by nature alone, but without our nature we would not need to be educated. Our very natures are what obligate us to be educated.

How children learn is, of course, an old argument in education, and difficult to separate from the influence of parents and culture. Consequently, the question becomes whether there is something implicit in or natural to a child that should be honored? Is nature the place where learning comes to light? Or does Freud have the right idea: Is there something libidinal within the child that requires constraint? One difficulty in thinking along these lines is confusion with the notion that children *never* learn by reading or listening or writing in the same painstaking way Thoreau did: “To read a book in a true spirit is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem” (Thoreau, in Bickman, 1999, p.13).

Even the ideas of Rousseau and Thoreau are incomplete in their applicability to ultra-child-centered models of education such as Sudbury. Thoreau’s emphasis upon lived experience as an essential element of education has been abused as a soapbox to promote unstructured educational approaches free from discipline or rigor, and the role of the teacher whittled down to the point where they have no right to ask that children demonstrate they have in fact learned anything at all. Despite the fact that Rousseau’s analogy is often worshipped as the creation story for the idea of child-centric education, there is a paradox in even this well-accepted interpretation. The paradox lies in Rousseau’s beliefs about pedagogy: While the child must always do what he wants to do, he *should* want to do only what the tutor wants him to do. Sudbury completely frees its students from all moral precepts altogether. Personal philosophies aside, parents certainly do need to exercise some decisions for their child – what school the child will go to, for instance.

Both Dewey and Rousseau agreed that education cannot take place in a social vacuum, that it is society that is fundamental, not the student herself. The Sudbury School attempts to create a social vacuum that many do not believe can exist. Using a privatized form of education to shield students from the outer world seems like a recipe for failure. It ignores the larger context of society, and oversimplifies the process of

learning and education. The underlying philosophy must adhere to beliefs about the nature of morality in its assumptions about children being inherently drawn to making good choices and society being the source of all evil.

If the Sudbury and Summerhill models are to be faulted for their beliefs about human nature, then education itself must be held accountable as well. All educational models grow from the seeds of judgment. Ideas about values and morals, good and bad, healthy and unhealthy, all represent personal beliefs about what is important in the life of a child. If one philosopher believes that society is the root of all evil, existing only to traumatize individuals into neurotic states of being, another will postulate the possibility that individuals might be responsible for evil and misery because they are selfish and mean. Substituting one's own emotional judgments for careful empirical description, however, is a slippery slope.

What should we make of the idea that a student's emotional well-being depends upon his desires being consistently gratified? Honestly, not much. This assumption ignores the possibility that long-term happiness depends upon a measure of self-discipline and sacrifice. How about the notion that uninitiated adult interaction with students is merely a power play that will create adult repression and neurosis? This completely overemphasizes the role of student interest in education and neglects the important fact that children are members of a huge, complex planet that adults have some familiarity with and to which they can and should introduce young people. Certainly students should be encouraged to explore, analyze, study themselves, ask questions, be creative, but is discovery the only, or best, way to teach these qualities? Is it even possible to *teach* someone to *think*?

Forcing young children to learn something against their will is hardly the picture we get when we think about early education in public schools. Yet the founders of Sudbury see only oppression and rigidity in the process. They would like the first few years of schooling to allow children completely unfettered access to anything they may desire to explore (within the limits of safety), and without the intervention of adults. Young children are naturally egocentric and curious. Allowing them time and space to engage in self-exploration under the aegis of education is a reasonable and expected aspect of learning. But the ways in which adults direct and train these tendencies will affect the child's entire intellectual, emotional, and moral development. Laying the groundwork through teaching moral lessons and encouraging empathy helps them become responsible, critically-thinking adults. It need not be the entirety of the child's educational experience, but an important part of the whole.

Perhaps the Sudbury model has it right with their aversion to pressuring students, particularly for academic reasons. Maybe it is the root of all childhood trauma. But probably not. It is pure drivel that high expectations are dangerous or damaging, and frankly anti-intellectual. If this were to operate in a traditional school, one must never challenge oneself to get better at something because doing so could cause irreparable damage to one's self-esteem. So does just feeling good about yourself mean that you are a good person? It seems quite possible that someone might feel great about himself and

still be a narcissistic ass, a run-of-the-mill jerk, or even a violent psychopath. Simply making a student *feel* good is not the same as that student *doing or being* good.

Ultimately, it is impractical and illogical to apply Sudbury principles en masse to the public education system. Schools must answer to policymakers, the judiciary, the public, all of whom have an investment in the education of students. Despite what Freud or Neill may believe, teachers clearly have a duty to their students. And in the public education system, they also have a duty to provide instruction in those areas that the public has deemed important.

A myriad of impracticalities preclude a Sudbury model of education from being successful on a public scale. A major reason that the school is able to grant such unusual freedoms to its students is its small student body. Since they are private, they have the luxury of excluding those students (and parents) who may not either buy into their system, or would serve as a monkey wrench in the gears. If asked whether they would accept a learning disabled student of any ilk, Sudbury representatives state that they would. However, when pressed, they admit that they do not recognize learning disorders, and do not label students in any particular manner. If they deem a student simply too unable or unwilling to exhibit a high degree of self-control, they reserve the right to deny admission. Their heart is in the right place, but very often in education one must use one's head as well. The Sudbury Schools will always appeal only to a small and sensitive minority of parents who eagerly await the return of Flower Power.

In the end, Hofstadler got it most correct when he spoke of the marriage of intellectualism and emotions in the education system. He called "the fundamental fallacy of anti-intellectualism is that it is based upon a divorce of intellect from all other human qualities with which it may be combined" (Hofstadler, 1963, p.46). Why must the concept of intellect be antagonistic with that of emotion? How are the two consistent? I have yet to meet an individual prepared to sacrifice all socio-emotional and character development in education for that of the intellect alone. Sudbury parents care as deeply for their children as parents of children going to traditional schools. They desire their children to feel happy and safe in their educational environment. Whether they become doctors or ditchdiggers is no concern of theirs.

So if it is possible and desirable for traditional schools to find a balance between intellectualism and scholarship and happiness and self-esteem, is the "natural approach" the best way to go about it? While E.D. Hirsch has argued that there are ideas and pieces of knowledge that everyone should know, we have discussed others that contend that natural exploration is the only way. In trying to balance depth and breadth, it has become in all-or-nothing debate. In reality, of course, both are needed. For a student to be able to make connections across disciplines and understand her place in the world and how her actions affect others within it should be a fundamental goal of any model of education.

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